

Students' Perceptions toward Weblogs in an EFL Class

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Abstract: *The explosion of technological developments with computer, and the Internet has provided teachers and learners with the technological tools that can be implemented as pedagogical instruments in the classrooms. There is a growing body of literature on weblogs or blogs as an effective learning tool in education, in general, and in L2 learning, in particular. This paper offers an account of how blogs were integrated as a pedagogical tool in an EFL classroom and reports on the students' feedback and perception on the use of this social medium to enhance their L2 learning. Data was collected through a questionnaire and interview involving a group of English majors. In so doing, they participated in some stages of the blogging activities designed for the study. Then, they filled out the questionnaire and sat for the interview. Analysis of data revealed positive responses from the students regarding the use of blogs in their L2 learning activities. They perceived that the use of blogs had generally enhanced their L2 skills such as reading and writing, developed their self-confidence, improved their communication skills and reduced their anxiety when learning and using the language among their peers. Given the advantages offered by weblogs, educators and teachers may invest further in this area to create better environment for L2 learners to develop.*

Key Words: *students, perceptions, weblogs, EFL Class*

Introduction

Presently, due to technological developments, the focus of the ESL/EFL classrooms has shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered learning with many educators and teachers showing increasing concern on how their students learn rather than their own methods of teaching (Pinkman, 2005). Along with this shift language educators and teachers have employed various resources to equip learners with the knowledge and skills that could make them more autonomous and independent in their learning. It seems that learners can get the most out of the learning environment if they take responsibility for their own learning both inside and outside the classrooms. The technological developments in the information and communication technology (ICT) have thus equipped learners with various tools in the form of computer-based or Internet-based resources to help them to take charge of their own learning. Presently, many social network services (SNS) such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter have become popular with the younger generation worldwide. Given the increasing popularity of the use of weblogs in social media, in general, and in the teaching and learning environments, in particular, weblogs or for

short “blogs” have gained growing popularity as authentic and constructive learning tools especially in the language classrooms (Seitzinger, 2006).

Review of Literature

Weblogs or blogs are online journals where users can update their works/artifacts in a continuous fashion (Matheson, 2004). As a social networking and medium for communication, blogs enabled the users to interact not only with the computer, but also with other bloggers. Lately, blogs are gradually being used as pedagogical tools in the classrooms and it is deemed to assume “a more communicative role than the less interactive CALL applications” (Pinkman, 2005, p.14). Ward (2004) in a study which examined the effectiveness of using blog in the reading and writing classroom discovered that the use of blogs received positive responses from the students. They perceived that using blogs not only had raised their interest in the L2 reading and writing classroom, but also facilitated their language learning process. In another study which examined the usefulness of blogs in developing students’ writing in ESL context, Nadzrah Abu Bakar & Kemboja Ismail (2009) concluded that the students perceived blogging as an interesting and motivating learning device that had helped them to interact effectively with their peers and expanded their critical thinking ability. More importantly, they also perceived that blogging had aided them to develop their L2 writing constructively. Through its newly-found status as an educational tool, blogging allows the learners to “reflect on their perceptions of the learning materials and on their own learning process” (Seitzinger, 2006, p.6). Furthermore, they provide multimedia environments where users can archive their artifacts and reflections that represent their growth and competencies. Additionally, as stated by Churchill (2009), blogs, serving as one form of portfolio, can enable students to publish their own writing, discuss group assignments, peer review each other’s work, collaborate on projects and manage their digital portfolios. In addition to written entries, blogs also allow the artifacts to take such forms as images, sound files, video clips, and so forth (Knight, Hakel & Gromko, 2006). Therefore, audio blogs or voice blogs that archive students’ oral assignments are proposed (Hsu, Wang & Comac, 2008; Sun, 2009). Additionally, Galien and Bowcher(2010) state that using blogs offer L2 learners an additional and motivating opportunity since they publish their work in a nonjudgmental, enjoyable environment, and provide more balanced communication among L2 learners. Lui, Choy, Cheung and Li (2006) maintain that although learners’ perception is an influential factor in the successful adoption of educational technology, there is no inherent pedagogical value in weblogs. In order to obtain any educational value out of weblogs, learners are required to pursue educationally sound behaviors such as participation and interaction. The decision on the acceptance of weblogs and the way that weblogs are used is determined ultimately by learners’ perception.

Purpose of the Study

As stated earlier, research on the status of blogs in education is still in its infancy, and this is even less frequent in the language teaching and learning sphere. A review of literature reveals that not much research is done on blogs in Iran. Given this the purpose of this study is to examine the EFL learners' perception toward blogs as a learning tool. In so doing, the researcher introduced L2 learners to blogs and attempted to investigate how L2 learners perceived learning English through blogs. To this end, the following research question is posited:

RQ: What are the students' perceptions toward the use of weblogs in classrooms?

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were a group 40 English majors studying Translation Studies in Mahabad Payam Noor Center in West Azarbaijan, Iran. They were both males and females with an age range of 19 to 26. All participants were Iranian and their native language was either Kurdish or Turkish. They all volunteered to participate in the study. The only required condition for participation in the study was having basic computer literacy, access to the Internet and a computer.

Instruments

Two instruments were developed by the researcher in order to obtain information concerning English majors' perception toward weblogs. The first one was a questionnaire consisting of two parts; the first part dealing with demographic data on participants' computer literacy, weblogs and the Internet, gender, age and year of study at university. And the second part consisting of 20 items focused on students' perception toward the role of weblogs in the process of language learning (See Appendix 1). Before the questionnaire being administered, it was piloted to remove any ambiguity related to the items. In addition, it was tested to be sure of the reliability of the questionnaire. In fact, the reliability calculated through Cronbach's alpha was 0.87. All ambiguities were modified and revised based on the feedback received from the pilot study. The items were written in the form of a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree= 5, agree=4, undecided=3, disagree=2, and strongly disagree=1(See Appendix 1). Before administering the questionnaire, the researcher held some sessions to familiarize the participants with the task and project. Maximum time allotted to complete the questionnaire was about 10 minutes. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview covering five questions concerning students' view on weblogs (See Appendix 2).

Design

This study was carried out through a descriptive survey method. In this type of study one only studies a sample to investigate the incidence and distribution of variables without any manipulation or control over it. Moreover, data concerning students' perceptions was gathered by administering a self-reported measure and interview.

Procedure

Prior to data collection and recruiting volunteers to participate in the project, the researcher informed the participants of the purpose of the study, and the necessary conditions for the participation in the study. All the participants were assured that their information would be kept anonymous. The instructor of the course (the author) introduced the Blog in the third week of the semester in the academic year 2013/2014, showing the students how to create an account in the Blogger website (<http://www.blogger.com>), changing themes, posting entries and comments, as well as inviting friends. Then the instructor asked all the students to create account in the Blogger website and to subscribe to the class blog and other students' blogs. For the next 13 weeks, the use of the blog was optional; and the students were encouraged to use the blog as an open communication tool and reflection space by and in which they could post whatever they liked to share with their peers. In order to encourage students' to use the blog, the instructor used the class's blog to post class' advertisements throughout that semester. For the purpose of the study, the data regarding students' attitudes and use of the blog was collected from three different sources which include questionnaire, students' blog posts, and interviews. The questionnaire was administrated in the last day of instruction of that semester for the academic year 2013/2014. The participants were asked to fill the questionnaire in paper format anonymously. Participations in the questionnaire were voluntary. No extra grades were given to complete the questionnaire. All the students in the class ($n=40$) completed the questionnaire with a response rate of 100%. In the last week of the semester, the researchers visited all the students' blogs in order to review the students' participation in the blog within the semester and then counted the number of the students' entries and comments which were coded based on the type of their contents afterward. Within a gap of a few days of the end of the semester, the researcher conducted the interview with 30 students who sent, via email, their agreement to participate in follow up interviews each of which lasted for one hour.

Data Analysis

After administering the questionnaires, the researcher scored them and analyzed the data. In addition to this, the researcher analyzed the results obtained from interviewing the participants.

Results

This section covers two parts. The first part deals with the analysis of the results of the questionnaire and the second part presents the analysis of the results of the interview.

Questionnaire:

Analysis of the results of the item (1) revealed that majority of the learners enjoyed expressing their positive views to blogs (92%). That is, 38 out of 40 students strongly agreed they enjoyed using blogs. This is in line with the notion offered by Lui, Choy, Cheung and Li (2006) stating that to obtain any educational value out of weblogs, learners are required to pursue educationally sound behaviors such as participation and interaction. Over item (2), most students agreed that blogs were useful tools for learning. In fact, 91% reported that they were effective in learning English. As with item (3), 89.6% hold positive attitude toward the role of blogs in educational settings. With regards to item (4) only 22% believed that weblogs were hard to use. In other words, 78% held positive perceptions to blogs. This finding goes in accordance with that of Song and Chan (2008) and Galien and Bowcher (2010) who discovered that majority of the students found it easy to use blogs in their assignment. 86% of the students also mentioned that using blogs would help them to learn more (item # 5). Concerning item (6), 85% of the students suggested that classes conducted through blogs were more fun than those taught through conventional methods. This finding is consistent with that of Song and Chan (2008) who revealed that students in their study enjoyed using the group blogs as a mode of learning and students regarded blogs as a new, fun and interesting way to learn.

On item (7), 83% reported that blogs offered them good rather than bad experience. For item (8) concerning their satisfaction with the availability of blogs on the Internet, 81% of the students expressed their strong agreement. Likewise, when asked about how they felt about other learners commenting on their blog (item #9), 85.7% of learners responded positively, saying that posting and reading comments from their classmates were pleasant. This finding goes in accordance with that of Pinkman (2005) who concluded that peer comment on the blogs helped students make progress in writing skills. For item (10) which measured their dislike to blog use, only 16% of the respondents chose “strongly agree” while the rest, i.e. 84% picked “strongly disagree”. This indicates that students support the use of new technology in their classes. Following this, 82% of the students expressed their strong approval toward item (11) revealing learners’ excitement about the use of blogs. In response to item (12) 79% of the students expressed their disapproval of feeling bored toward the use of blogs in their learning. Regarding item (13), 83% stated their strong agreement toward the use of blogs as a tool for communication and reflection to help their learning; while for item (14) 84% of the students showed their strong disagreement concerning their discomfort toward the use of blogs as a tool for learning. For item (15), 85% of the students approved use of blogs in their classes. 80% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the item (16) of their avoidance of the use of blogs in

their learning process. When the students were asked whether they preferred to use blogs or other means of communication (item 17), only 61% stated their strong agreement; the rest were mainly in favor of other means of communication. With regard to item (18) 83.5% indicated their strong agreement in favor of participation in blog activities. Additionally, 77% revealed their desire to see the content of other students' messages in the blog (item 19). Finally, majority of the students (91%) expressed their strong agreement as to revisiting blogs (item 20)

Interview:

This section of the study covered 5 questions.

A semi-structured interview (see Appendix 2) was supposed to be conducted with the same group consisting of 40 students too. Unfortunately, 10 students did not attend the interview session. Therefore, it was carried out with 30 students. The purpose of the interview was to get a better insight into students' blogging perceptions. The interview was conducted individually in students' native language.

As with question number 1 concerning students' perceptions to the use of blogs, majority of the students (84%) believed that blogs were exciting and useful for learning and they helped the students to learn faster and more easily.

For interview question number 2, regarding their interest in blogs, most students (79%) were in favor of blogs.

With regard to question number 3, concerning students' preferences to blogs in comparison with other tools of learning, most (80%) were supportive of blogs on condition that they had access to quality internet.

In response to question number 4 whether or not students will use blogs to improve their English proficiency in future, 70% stated that they would use these tools more than before because of the ease of use. Finally, when students were asked how they evaluated blogs in learning English, 90% reported that blogs played a significant role in learning because of the diversity of the roles that they could perform.

Discussion

The results of the data analysis revealed that students regarded weblogs as enjoyable and effective tools in order to improve their English. These results have implications for English teachers and educators interested in using weblogs in their classes to promote learning and encourage autonomy. The results of this study also support the premise that having students make essential decisions about learning tasks is valuable. In other words, the choices students make regarding interaction with new people, independent language production, and collaboration

with peers on creative tasks help language learners to develop a sense of ownership in learning English through the weblog use and increase motivation. The data from the questionnaire indicate that the students in the study generally perceived the use of weblogs for English language learning positively. As Handal (2004) states, positive beliefs and attitudes largely contribute to teachers' implementing a new innovation. This supports what Arani (2005) and Blackstone Spiri & Naganuma (2007) discovered in their studies. They reported that weblogs increased students' confidence, improved their writing skills, facilitated the sharing of ideas with their classmates, connected them with their classmates, and provided them with the flexibility to choose when and where they worked, enabled them to express their thoughts and allowed them to acquire skills such as conducting online research and thinking critically about issues.

Contrary to the high rate of positive responses provided by students, a small group of students expressed their dislike to weblogs. The negative attitude that they offered for their dislike towards weblogs may be related to not owning computers of their own, weak Internet access at their homes, time constraints, insufficient digital skills and preference for writing on paper. The results from this study indicate that weblogs have great potential for English language learning. English language instructors and educators in higher learning institutions in Iran should consider integrating weblogs into their courses. It is an easy to use tool that can be utilized to train learners to be not only fluent and confident communicators of the English language, but also digital savvy, as well as resourceful users of the Internet who are capable of obtaining information from websites as well as making connections between all of the information that they find. These skills will better equip the learners and make them more marketable to prospective local and global employers upon graduation.

Conclusion and Implications

Participants largely perceived the activity to be useful for improving their English. Assessing whether improvements in English skills related to the web-logging activity actually occurred was beyond the scope of this study. This study showed that blogs can be used as a distant learning tool to interact with other students, the teacher or native people in a natural learning environment. According to Blackstone Spiri & Naganuma (2007), three features of the blogging activities seem to make them attractive and powerful curricular component for university-level English language classes:

- 1) their accessibility beyond the limits of the traditional classroom, 2) the personalized, student-centered nature of the interactions that they facilitate, and 3) their capacity for motivating students to work autonomously (whether alone, in pairs or small groups) to consider, produce and react to more content more frequently than a teacher might expect. These features combine to make blogging a highly productive, communicatively meaningful and effective approach to helping students refine and develop their language skills. If organized carefully, distance foreign language education offers students a chance to learn without time and space constraints in an

interactive learning environment. Thus, it becomes a more powerful tool to learn and practice the target language outside the class by training more reflective and critical students. In order for weblogs to be successfully used to encourage and extend students' learning, teachers need to guide and direct students in their use of the new technology throughout the learning process. It is essential that teachers monitor students' interaction and provide timely intervention. That is, in addition to the attention paid to the process and products of learning, teachers should take part in students' discussion process and give appropriate feedback when necessary respond to queries to help the interactive meaningful dialogues occur.

Despite these results, more research at using weblogs will be necessary to understand Weblogs better and to provide more effective learning environment which facilitate language learners' skills and interactions.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire**Gender:** Male Female **Age:****Computer Literacy:** Novice Average Expert **Year of Study:**

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 Blogs are one of the most enjoyable ways to communicate with others.					
2 Blogs are useful for learning English.					
3 Blogs have contributed positively in the educational settings.					
4 Blogs are hard to use.					
5 The use of blogs in the class would make me learn more.					
6 Classes that use blogs are more fun than traditional classes.					
7 I have more good experiences than bad experiences with blogging.					
8 I am happy with the availability of blogs service on the Internet.					
9 Posting and reading messages and comments in the blogs is a pleasant process for me.					
10 I do not like to use the blogs in my learning.					
11 I feel excited about the use of blogs in my class.					
12 I feel bored towards the use of blogs in my class					
13 I feel comfortable with the use of blogs as a tool for communication and reflection.					
14 I feel discomfort able with the use of blogs in my class.					
15 Blogs must be used in all classes.					
16 I avoid the use of blogs as far as I can.					
17 I prefer to use blog rather than other means of communication.					

18	I would participate in the blog activity if it is available in the class.					
19	I do care about the content of other students' messages in the blog.					
20	I would revisit the blog frequently.					

Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Year of Study:

1. What are the advantages of blogging in learning English?
2. How do you feel about blogs in learning English?
3. Would you prefer to use blogs or other means of learning to improve your English?
4. Will you continue to use blogs in future?
5. How do you evaluate blogs in learning English?