

WEBLOGS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The digital explosion of information on the Internet has resulted in a need for a new and up-to-date way for Digital Natives to learn English. Educators have reported numerous benefits of using weblogs in English language learning. This article presents a small scale study on the use of weblogs for English language learning at tertiary level in Malaysia. Twenty six students kept weblogs for a duration of a semester.

This study investigated how students perceived the use of weblogs for English language learning. A questionnaire which was made up of both close-ended and open-ended questions was administered at the end of the study. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to analyse the students' responses to the questionnaire. The study found that students were aware of their audience when they blogged and that they geared their writing towards their audience. In addition, they also interacted with others through the use of the comment feature on their weblogs.

Furthermore, the majority of the students enjoyed blogging and found weblogs useful for English language learning. This study found that weblogs are promising interactive tools for English language learning.

Keywords: weblogs, English language, language learning, perceptions, questionnaire

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The Internet is a prominent technology that has revolutionized the way people gain access to information as well as how they interact and communicate with one another in the 21st century. Information and knowledge are now increasingly being distributed via the Internet. In addition, the affordable cost of computers has resulted in the increasing number of computers purchased for work and home use. Many university students nowadays are from the Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) and are Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001). They are characterized as those born from 1982 onwards and who grew up with technology.

The Net Generation is made up of digital literate, connected, social, goal oriented, experiential, visual and kinesthetic learners who enjoy working in groups, crave interactivity, have short attention spans and prefer working on things that matter (Baron & Maier, 2005). These characteristics have an impact on how they learn and access information.

Weblogs have much to offer the Digital Native English language learners in tertiary education. It is a tool of communication that is used in the real world not only by individuals but also by many industries ranging from news and entertainment to business and politics.

It is relatively easy to use and intrinsically motivating. It enables learners to communicate with the world in an authentic manner. The use of weblogs in English language classrooms can facilitate and enhance English language learning as learners are presented with the opportunity to interact and connect with materials as well as an authentic audience outside of the classroom, thus making the language learning process an interactive and intrinsically motivating experience for the learners.

This research study investigates how students perceive the use of weblogs for English language learning. It also looks at how weblogs can be utilized in order to motivate the learning of English language among the present digital generation of learners in a Malaysian context as well as how weblogs can help equip them with real life communication and interaction skills that they would require when they graduate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Weblogs: Definitions and Statistics

There are currently many definitions of weblogs or blogs (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2004; Paquet, 2002; Walker, 2003). However, all of these definitions agree to a number of features that define the characteristics of what constitutes a weblog. Weblogs are web pages that are frequently updated and contain dated posts which are listed in reverse chronological order with the most recent post presented first (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2004; Paquet, 2002; Walker, 2003). Some weblogs have links on the side of the page linking the weblog to other web pages or weblogs.

In the last few years, weblogs have become a popular form of communication on the World Wide Web. The ease of use of web-based software that makes online publishing simple has resulted in a weblog explosion. Although there are now various other forms of weblogs such as photoblogs, audioblogs and videoblogs, most weblogs are still in text form. In Technorati's most recent State of the Blogosphere report (2008), 133 million weblogs have been indexed since 2002. Seven point four (7.4) million weblogs were posted in the last 120 days, 1.5 million weblogs were posted in the last 7 days and 900. 000 weblogs were posted in 24 hours (Technorati, 2008). It seems that the number of weblogs is continuing to grow and has become even more pervasive now.

The creation of Blogger, a free weblog hosting site, increased the number of weblogs which mostly took the form of personal journals. Personal journal weblogs reflect the writers' thoughts and this can vary from a reflection on a subject, a conversation, what they saw on their way to work or even the movie that they watched the night before. Blogger.com, which places no restriction on the content that is posted, makes it easy to use as well as accessible with any browser. All a blogger has to do is type in a box on anything that comes to mind and click on the 'Publish Post' button in order to post the entry on the web page. It is perhaps this simple to use and free form of weblogs that has resulted in the shift from the original filter-style weblogs to personal journal-style weblogs which are more common today.

Features of Weblogs

The format of the weblog is the common ground which all bloggers share (Hourihan, 2002). Posts on weblogs are presented in reverse-chronological order which allows the reader the ease of reading the latest information at the top of the page.

This gives the reader a sense of immediacy without having to scan the page for what is new since their last visit. In addition, the newest information at the top sets the expectation of updates.

Other distinguishing characteristics of a weblog are: a date header, a time stamp, and a permalink (Hourihan, 2002). Often, the author's name appears at the end of each post in addition to the comments link which allows readers to respond to the post. Connections in weblogs are created through the use of links which bind bloggers into a community. The time stamp provides the weblog with the sense of a timely content. Through the time stamp, the weblog reader is able to discern the blogger's update pattern. The permalink is the link to the location of the post in the weblog's archive. It allows for precise references to be made and for other bloggers to link to the specific piece of information.

Weblogs in English Language Learning

In English language learning, weblogs can be used to provide extra reading for learners, as online learner journals that can be read by the other learners, to guide learners to online resources appropriate for their level, to increase the sense of community in a class, to encourage participation from shy learners, to stimulate out of class discussion, to encourage a process writing approach, as an online portfolio of learners' written work and to help build a closer relationship between learners in a large class (Stanley, 2005b). Weblogs also provide learners with a real audience, an opportunity for peer review as well as accommodate a range of process-based writing tasks that learners enjoy doing (Raith, 2009; Ward, 2004). They are extremely versatile and the number of ways that they can be used is limited only to the imagination of the user.

There are three types of weblogs used in English language classrooms which are the tutor weblog, the learner weblog and the class weblog (Campbell, 2003). The tutor weblog gives learners daily practice, promotes the exploration of English websites, encourages online communication, enables teachers to provide learners with class information, serves as a place for the teacher to provide clarification on areas that the class may be having difficulty understanding and provides learners with links to other websites for self-study in their own time.

The learner weblog is created and maintained by individual learners or by a small group of learners who work together in order to maintain their weblog (Campbell, 2003). This kind of weblogs work best in reading and writing classes as it encourages the students to surf the web in search of articles to read as well as write about what they have read in their posts. An essential part of blogging is close reading and interpretation (Smith, 2004).

The act of hyperlinking to other articles in their posts develops awareness in learners that their weblogs are written not in isolation but instead are linked in the blogosphere and that anyone can view their post on the topic. Weblogs can be linked and cross-linked which creates online communities (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

The comments link on weblogs further enable the possibility of further exchange of ideas between learners as well as others who are outside the classroom.

The class weblog is a weblog that is shared by a whole class (Campbell, 2003). It could be used as an online bulletin board for learners to post messages to one another and also as a place for classroom discussions and the sharing of thoughts on a common assignment.

It could also be used for developing learners' research and writing skills. In addition, a class weblog could also serve as a space for an international classroom language exchange between two classes of learners who are located in different countries but sharing one class weblog space.

Benefits of Weblogs

Although weblogs were not originally designed for language learning, they have immense potential for it. Students generally find weblog writing valuable for language learning (Arani, 2005; Blackstone, et al., 2007; Hall, 2005; Pinkman, 2005; Tan et al., 2005b; Walker, 2005; Ward, 2004). Learners at college level found writing weblogs a motivating activity as they were able to experience authentic writing in context (Brooks et al., 2004; Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006). Writing weblogs also allows learners to practice writing skills such as summary, paraphrases and development of voice (Brooks et al., 2004; Laitner, 2007). In addition, weblogs provide language learners opportunity to practice using the language that they have learned in class (Pinkman, 2005), raise language awareness and promote learner development (Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006), practice writing (Tu, Chen & Lee, 2007), help create a collaborative class environment where learners can give and receive feedback (Barrios, 2003; Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006; Kennedy, 2003; Laitner, 2007; Minugh, 2008; Tan et al., 2005b) and present learners with a space to reflect on their language learning (Mynard, 2007). The use of class weblogs also allow students to see comments that were written for the class as a whole as well as comments that were directed to them individually. Learners can also see for themselves how their writing has progressed over time through the use of weblogs (Johnson, 2004).

Some of the attributes of weblogs which provide potentials to be used in language learning are that they provide the students with an audience and comments, voice, conversations and dialogue, ownership and choices as well as archives (Davis, 2006, 2008). By providing students with an audience who are located outside the classroom walls along with the possibility of getting comments from them, weblogs give students a sense of recognition. The students realize that their teacher is no longer the only member of audience for their work and that what they write and have to say on their weblogs are read by a bigger audience made up of their peers, teacher and possibly other readers.

This motivates them to produce better quality of work as they would not want to publish work that they would feel embarrassed about (Halavais as cited in Online Cl@ssroom, 2004). The comments feature found in weblogs can be used to further enhance the interactivity of weblogs. Through the comments feature, students now can receive feedback from not only the instructor but also from their peers (Blackstone et al., 2007; Ward, 2004). Discussions between students are no longer bounded by time or place. Students can now share ideas more effectively, review each other's work and discuss corrections with one another (Blackstone et al, 2007; Flatley, 2005). Comments allow students to both give and receive feedback. (Blackstone et al, 2007; Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006; Kennedy, 2003).

Weblogs also provide students with an opportunity to develop their own voice via writing (Brooks et al., 2004; Davis, 2006, 2008). Developing a voice is important in learning and for students to participate in conversations on weblogs effectively. In addition, weblogs permit shy students who are hesitant to speak up in a classroom to share their ideas and to be heard by many (Downes, 2004; Song & Yuen, 2008). Weblogs have great potentials for developing relationships between learners and building communities (Bloom, 2008; Tomei & Lavin, 2007; Stanley, 2005a, 2005b).

Students have been found to use the comments of weblogs to give each other compliments, to correct errors and give suggestions, to show care about the perception of their entry, give personal responses and additional information, express disagreements and different opinions, make comments on comments that have been written by others before them, pose questions to the blogger and answer their readers' questions (Bloom, 2008).

Conversations and dialogues which take place in the students' posts can promote critical thinking and the construction of knowledge among the students involved (Richardson, 2004, 2009). The use of weblogs in education enables students to make choices and take ownership not only of their weblog space but also of their learning process (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Davis, 2006, 2008; Tan et al., 2005a; Ward 2004). This empowers the students by letting them take control of how they learn. The archives available on weblogs make them ideal for keeping records of the learning that is taking place and makes it easier for anyone to retrieve the students' work as long as there is a computer and an Internet connection. The archives also allow the students to view their own work and progress over a period of time. Teachers can also use the archives to evaluate the students' work.

In language education, weblogs can provide a better integration into the target language community, integration into a new world of inter-connected media and lowers affective filters through forming collaborative relationships with language learning facilitators (Blackstone et al., 2007; Leverett, 2006). Weblogs also allow English language learners who grew up in countries where technology was not part of their daily lives to be exposed to technology by allowing them to publish their work online while, at the same time, being integrated into an English speaking discourse community (Minugh, 2008). In addition, weblogs also orientate the learners towards communication in the networked world (Kavaliauskienė et al., 2006).

Weblogs also integrate students into the world of interconnected media by permitting them to become familiar with the weblog environment both as a writer and also as a reader. Blogging is a genre of writing that has great value in developing critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy (Richardson, 2004, 2009).

It allows students to reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think, carry on writing over a period of time and engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that leads to further writing and thinking. Students get to learn how to search for information on the Internet, read the information in order to understand it and respond to it by posting their thoughts on their weblogs or leaving comments to the original weblog writer. In addition, self-publishing on weblogs makes students more personally responsible for the content and structure of their writing as they are aware that they are writing for a real audience (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Weblogs enable the uploading and linking of files as well as web pages which are useful for language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

They teach students that being able to retrieve information from the Internet as and when they need it and being able to make connections between all the information that they read is more important than what they actually know (Siemens, 2005). Furthermore, orientating class writing towards an audience other than the teacher helps lower the affective filters in a class and focuses the learning on writing in the real world rather than writing in isolation and discovering at a later stage that they are unable to transfer their skills into the real world upon leaving the language classroom.

Drawbacks of Weblogs

Some of the drawbacks that were encountered in an English Teacher Training course in Japan with the use of weblogs were that the students often wrote entries just for the sake of completing the assignment, there were less and less comments left by students on one another's weblogs as the semester progressed, slightly less than half of the student's weblogs did not receive any responses by their fellow classmates, a number of the students left five or fewer comments on their classmates' weblogs, many students did not have computers at home and therefore had difficulty in updating their weblogs, students took weeks to set up their own weblogs and some forgot their usernames and passwords, a few did not take to blogging and rarely updated their weblogs and the weblogs all were discontinued when the course ended (Hall, 2005).

Another study found that there was a lack of student participation on weblogs with 35% of the students publishing fewer than three out of the seven weblog posts that was set for them in the beginning of the semester and a further 68% said they did not know how to post images on their weblogs (Wu, 2005).

Another difficulty faced by many English-Foreign-Language (EFL) teachers using weblogs with their classes is the lack of participation from outside the classroom (Campbell, 2004; Wu, 2005). This problem could be overcome by locating others in the blogosphere with similar interests. In order for this to happen, students need to be encouraged to leave feedback on others' weblogs who share similar interests with them (Wu, 2005). The frequent visits to their new friends' weblogs could result in them receiving comments from these bloggers in return.

While the possibility of experiencing communicating with non-class bloggers in the global community can provide students with authentic and motivating experiences, instructors need to keep in mind that there is also the likelihood that there may be readers who might leave negative comments that are offensive and hurtful and such experiences can be detrimental to the learners' self-confidence (Pinkman, 2005; Wu, 2006). In addition, making the students' weblogs available for everyone to view on the Internet may make students fear the thought of having others view their thoughts and how politically correct such thoughts may be (Blackstone et al., 2007). Furthermore, a student who has trouble writing may feel embarrassed at letting others see their mistakes (Blackstone et al., 2007).

Students have also commented that problems of logging in and other technical problems were drawbacks of weblogs (Song & Yuen, 2008). In addition, it was also found that some students were new to blogging and needed technical support. One possible way to overcome this problem is to scaffold the use of weblogs and to provide students with technical support (Lavin, 2006; Farmer, Yue & Brooks, 2008). Students in previous studies also found blogging time consuming (Instone, 2005; Pinkman, 2005) indicating that the nature of the assignment which had to be done in their own time was difficult for them. Some students also reported that the lack of participation from other classmates is a drawback of blogging (Song & Yuen, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Setting

This study took place in a private university in Malaysia. It began with a total number of 29 students. However, only 26 students completed the study. All 26 students were enrolled in the first semester of the Foundation in Architecture programme. These students had signed up for the course Foundation English 151 for which the researcher was the instructor.

Foundation English 151 is a three credit-hour writing module that is compulsory for all first semester Foundation in Architecture students. The course ran for one semester. The class was 3 hours and met once a week. The student participants consisted of 23 males and 3 female students from Botswana, China, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman and Sweden. Their ages ranges between 17 to 24 years old. English is a second language for all of the students who participated in this study. These students' language ability ranged from intermediate to upper intermediate as determined by the placement test (which consists of two parts: grammar and writing) scores which were administered in the beginning of the semester.

Instruments and Materials

Two instruments were utilized in this study. The first was the Blogger.com website. It was selected as it allows users to join and set up weblogs for no charge and is user friendly. Setting up an account on Blogger is simple and one does not require technical knowledge. In addition, writing on Blogger is similar to using a word processor. The students used Blogger to set up their individual learner weblogs which were later all linked to the tutor weblog via the blogroll.

This study, which entailed the students to blog outside class hours, required that they had access to computers with Internet connection. While most of the students had computers of their own and Internet access at home, those who did not could write their weblog posts using the computers and Internet access available on campus.

The second instrument used was directly administered questionnaires which consisted of both closed-ended as well as open-ended questions which were administered at the end of the study. Directly administered questionnaires were used because of the high response rate, the low cost involved and the availability of the researcher on site to answer any questions if the student respondents had any questions (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006).

The questionnaire was made up of 66 questions in total and was divided into seven sections. The first section (Questions 1-6) asked the students for their demographic details. The second section (Questions 7-10) which was made up of multiple choice questions focused on the students' computer resources and Internet access. The third part was a combination of both multiple choice questions and checklists which sought to determine the students' Internet use history. The fourth section (Questions 16-26) was made up of ten yes/no questions and one multiple choice question about the students' computer and Internet skills.

The fifth section (Questions 27-31) was also a combination of yes/no and multiple choice questions that dealt with the students' blogging habits. The sixth section (Questions 32-59) had statements which the students had to respond to by selecting one of the five possible answers on a 5-level Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Mildly Disagree, Neutral, Mildly Agree, Strongly Agree. The final part of the questionnaire (Questions 60-66) required that the students respond to a set of open-ended questions using their own words. For the purpose of this article, the researcher will only examine questions 32 to 56 as well as questions 62.

Methods

The questionnaires which were directly administered to the students at the end of the course were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The responses to the close-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics while the answers to the open-ended questions of the questionnaires were read and categorized according to the types of answers given.

Procedure

The weblog project was introduced to the students in the beginning of the September 2008 semester. It was explained to them that blogging would be part of their overall course assessment and that it would make up 10% of their final grade. It was an out-of-class activity that the students did on their own time that would mimic the act of blogging in the real world which is normally not done in class. Furthermore, it allowed the students the flexibility to write in their own time and not feel the pressure of having to complete a task within a specific time frame. The students were also told that their individual weblogs were theirs to maintain and would serve as a space for them to share their thoughts with their audience. They were made aware that while the instructor would be reading their weblogs, she would not be writing comments on any of their posts. This is done so that the students would not direct their writing towards the instructor as the main member of audience.

The students were not given a minimum word count for each of their weblog posts. They were told that they could publish as often as they wished but they had to have at least ten weblog posts by the end of the semester. In order to ease the students with the technology of blogging, they were given weekly topics to blog about in the first six weeks. In week 7, they were given the freedom to decide on a theme which they would be blogging about for the following weeks until the end of the semester. Apart from the weblog topics, the students were also given specific weekly tasks. These tasks were discussed in class each week when the class met and later posted on the tutor weblog. In addition, the students were also told that they could refer to the instructor if they encountered any problems with their weblogs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Setting up Weblog Accounts and Publishing on Weblogs

Students in past studies generally have positive views towards blogging for language learning (Arani, 2005; Blackstone et al., 2007; Hall, 2005; Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006; Tan et al, 2005a; Walker, 2005; Ward 2004). The responses to Question 32 show that with the exception of one student who had had prior experience maintaining a weblog before taking the course, the vast majority of the students (96.2%) had never set up a weblog of their own and this was the first time that they were doing so.

Even though many were creating their weblogs for the very first time, most of the students (69.3%) found it easy doing it on their own. Only 15.4% of the students had some difficulty trying to set up their weblogs whereas another 15.4% reported that they found setting up their weblogs neither easy nor difficult.

The same number of students (69.3%) who found setting up their weblogs easy also found publishing posts on their weblogs simple. However, about a fifth of the students (19.2%) had difficulty publishing their posts on their weblogs. This could be because blogging was a new skill for them.

Students' Perceptions of Their Weblogs

Of all the students in the study, only 42.3% were proud of their weblogs. Slightly more students (46.1%) reported that they liked working on their weblogs. The percentages are close between those who responded that they liked working on their weblogs and those who were proud of their weblogs. It is probable that those who enjoyed working on their weblogs were proud of the product of their work. In addition, the same percentage of students (46.1%), who were proud of their weblogs and enjoyed working on their weblogs, also liked seeing their work published online.

On the other hand, the percentages of students who were not proud of their weblogs (23.1%) did not like working on their weblogs (26.9%) and did not like seeing their work published online (23.1%) were also similar. It seems that when a student does not like working on their weblogs, it is also likely that they would also not like seeing their work online and therefore, would not be proud of their weblogs.

Reading Other Websites before Blogging

Writing on weblogs requires that students research the Internet and read to understand the content before they can write their response (Richardson, 2004, 2009). More than half of the students (57.7%) reported that they read other websites before writing on their weblogs, whereas 26.9% did not. Another 15.4% were neutral on whether or not they read other websites before they wrote on their weblogs.

Weblog Topics

Past research revealed that students would rather be given the freedom to choose their own topics to blog (Arani, 2005). Similarly, this study found that when it came to the choice of topics to blog about, most of the students (65.4%) preferred it more if they were given a free rein in making the decision on what to write about in their weblogs. More than a third of the students (38.5%) had a neutral view and did not mind if the instructor assigned them a topic to write or if they had to make the decision themselves. However, 38.4% of the students reported that they liked being assigned topics to write about by their instructor. This is probably because these students are still in their first semester of tertiary education and perhaps still expect to be instructed by their instructor. It seems that they are not yet comfortable being in situations where they are in control of making their own decisions in their learning process.

Preferred Medium of Writing

Students have been found to prefer writing on weblogs rather than in traditional journals (Arani, 2005). In this study, slightly more than half of the students (53.9%) preferred writing on their weblogs more than writing in class. In contrast, more than a quarter of them (26.9%) preferred writing in class more than writing on their weblogs. Another 19.2% did not express a preference for writing in either medium.

Students' Awareness of Audience

The awareness that there is an audience reading their weblogs encourages students to take more care over what they publish online (Arani, 2005; Blackstone et al., 2007; Halavais as cited in Online Cl@ssroom, 2004; Robertson & Whiting, 2006; Walker, 2005; Ward, 2004). The majority of the students (61.6%) in this study said that they took great care in how they expressed their thoughts in their weblogs. In addition, most students (65.4%) reported that they checked and edited their work more when publishing their work on their weblogs than when they write on paper in class. However, for about a fifth of the students (19.2%), publishing their work on their weblogs did not make a difference with the amount of editing that they did. Although most reported that they checked and edited their work more when publishing their work on their weblogs, the percentage of students (26.9%) who edited their work after they have published it on their weblogs is much less. Most students (34.6%) reported that they often did not edit their posts after they have been published.

Use of Comments

Comments have been reported to be motivating for learners (Arani, 2005; Blackstone et al., 2007; Brooks et al., 2004; Davis, 2006, 2008; Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006; Kennedy, 2003; Pinkman, 2005; Tan et al., 2005).

More than half of the students (57.7%) said that they liked reading the comments that their friends left for them on their weblogs. Although they liked reading the comments that their readers left for them, not many (34.6%) responded to those comments. In fact, half of the students (50%) did not respond to the comments that were written by their audience. Previous studies report that students enjoy reading their friends' weblogs and writing comments for them (Blackstone, et al., 2007; Tomei & Lavin, 2007). Similarly, most of the students in this study (61.5%) enjoyed reading their friends' weblogs. Many (53.8%) also enjoyed reading the comments that the other weblog readers left on their friends' weblogs and a further 53.9% liked writing comments on their friends' weblogs.

Weblogs for Sharing of Thoughts

Weblogs present learners with a space where they can express their thoughts to their audience (Barrios 2003; Davis, 2006, 2008). Over two thirds of the students (69.3%) in this study felt that writing in their weblogs has enabled them to share their thoughts and concerns on issues that matter to them with their readers. Weblogs also permit shy students who are hesitant to speak up in a classroom to be heard (Downes, 2004) and builds their confidence (Wells & Maurer, 2004). More than half of the students (57.7%) in this study felt that blogging has made them more confident in expressing their thoughts in public.

Weblogs for Improving Writing Skills

Almost two thirds of the students (65.4%) felt that blogging is also a good way of practicing writing and almost three quarters of the students (73.1%) reported that writing in their weblogs has improved their ability to think critically about issues that are going on around them. This supports the notion that blogging requires students to read the information that they find on the Internet and respond to them with their thoughts by blogging about the issues in their weblog posts or responding to their friends' posts by writing comments on their friends' weblogs (Richardson, 2004, 2009).

Weblogs for Connecting with Others

More than half of the students (57.7%) agreed that posting their work on their weblogs made their work look professional. Weblogs can also contribute towards building online communities (Stanley, 2005a, 2005b; Bloom, 2008; Miller & Shepherd, 2004; Nardi et al., 2004a; Robertson & Whiting, 2006; Tomei & Lavin, 2007). Most (46.1%) of the students thought that blogging connected them to other classmates who share similar interests.

Perceptions toward Weblog Project

Students generally like the use of weblogs for language learning (Arani, 2005; Blackstone et al., 2007; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004). Similar to previous studies, the majority of the students (69.2%) in this study generally viewed blogging positively. In contrast, a small percentage of the students (15.4%) disliked blogging while another two students (7.7%) expressed that they neither liked nor disliked blogging. The students' responses are reported verbatim.

Students Who Liked Weblogs

Similar to the findings of previous studies (Arani, 2005; Blackstone et al., 2007; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004), the majority of the students (69.2%) liked the weblog project. The students liked blogging because it increased their confidence, improved their writing skills, facilitated the sharing of ideas with their classmates, connected them to their classmates, provided them with the flexibility to choose when they wanted to work, enabled them to express their thoughts and allowed them to acquire skills such as conducting online research and thinking critically about issues.

The following are their responses:

➤ **Increased Confidence**

Weblogs makes learners more confident (Wells & Maurer, 2004). A student in this study reported that blogging increased her confidence in writing in a public space.

➤ **Improved Writing Skills**

Weblogs help learners practice writing and improve their writing skills (Arani, 2005; Blackstone et al., 2007; Kavaliauskienė et al., 2006). Five students felt that blogging helped improve their writing skills. The following are their comments:

"It improved my writing skills." Naledi

"Yes i like the blog project because it has helped me improve my writing." Kabelo Sean

"Gaining our skill in writing" Timothy

"I liked it because it help improve my writing ability" Michael

"Blogging kind of helped with writing using a wide range of vocabulary. And I think it has helped me improve with my grammatical error problems I used to have" Reza

➤ **Sharing of Ideas**

Students enjoy sharing ideas on weblogs (Blackstone et al., 2007; Brooks et al., 2004; Pinkman 2005). Weblogs also enable students to learn from their friends' writing (Arani, 2005). Five students in this study also felt that blogging had enabled them to see the ideas that their friends had and facilitated the sharing of each other's work. As weblog readers, they could read what their friends had to say on their weblogs as well as how they presented their ideas in writing. As bloggers, the students could share their thoughts and ideas with their audience. It seems that blogging has enabled them to read each other's work and gain insight on many issues. The following are their responses:

"YES, I got to look at other people's ideas," Jumana.

"YES, I had the chance to read different styles of writing," Jumana.

"I liked the blog project because I learnt to read other people's work," Othusitse.

"I gained more insight on issues posted by my classmates," Mukhtar.

"Yes, it was fun and it gave me an insight to writing and posting my work online for many people to read," Tebogo Junior.

"I could share my passions with others people," Tselantle.

"I had been able to post my thoughts where they could be viewed," Othusitse.

➤ **Connecting with Others**

Weblogs can be used as a tool to build communities between students in a large class (Stanley, 2005a, 2005b; Tomei & Lavin, 2007). Five students found that blogging enabled them to connect with their classmates. This connection made them become part of a community which also provided support for their work.

In addition, one student expressed that he understood issues better when he read his readers' comments. The following are the students' comments with regards to connecting with others:

"It is a good way of connecting with others," Naledi.

"Yes, it made me connect better with my classmates," Mukhtar.

"I also liked it because it connected me and other people in my class who share similar interests," Michael.

"It felt good being applauded by your fellow students on your good work," Tselantle.

"I was able to judge my understanding from others people's comments," Othusitse.

➤ **Flexible**

Students who use weblogs are not bound by place or time. Weblogs provide them the flexibility to work in any place and at any time of their choice as they are accessible 24 hours a day and seven days a week as long as there is a computer with an Internet connection available (Flatley, 2005; Song & Yuen, 2008). One student in this study expressed that she liked blogging as it offered her the flexibility of working on it in her own time. She also liked it because she was able to edit her posts.

➤ **Expression of Thought**

The students also liked blogging as it presented them with a space where they could freely express their thoughts. In addition, one student felt that it enabled him to present his ideas in a professional manner. The following are their comments:

"We can express ourselves on our blog," Timothy.

"I liked the way I was able to express my thoughts," Tselantle.

"It is a good way of expressing oneself," Mukhtar.

"Yes. It taught [sic.] me how to express my ideas in a more fun and professional way," Ashford.

"Yes, because when I am writing on my blog, I am free to write whatever I like, it's my space," Tshepo.

➤ **Acquisition of Other Skills**

Students learn to research for information through blogging and the act of writing their thoughts on what they read makes them practice critical thinking (Richardson, 2004, 2009). One student reported that he learned a new skill through blogging while another learned to research when he needed to generate ideas on what to blog about in his post. A third student thought that blogging helped improve his ability to think. Their comments follow:

"Yes, I did, it was a new thing for me. I like learning new skills," Ebrahim.

"Yes, even though I found it hard to blog as sometimes I had no ideas. But it has taught me to research," Joy.

"It also helps improve my thinking ability," Michael.

- **Other Responses**
There were also other reasons that the students stated for liking weblogs. Among the reasons stated are as follows:

"It's fun," Timothy.

"Kinda like it, as it is easier than writing on paper," Marzani.

"Of course I did, it has given me exposure," Tebogo Speakson.

"I fairly liked it. It felt great to see my own page on the net. I am not creative or good at writing," Innocent.

"Easy. Clean, fast," Luzman.

Students Who Disliked Blogging

Not all students like blogging. In fact, some students hate blogging (Walker, 2005). In this study, a few students (15.4%) reported that they disliked blogging. Not owning computers, erratic Internet connections, time constraints, insufficient digital skills and preference for writing on paper were reasons why they disliked blogging.

- **Not Owning a Computer**
One student stated that although he thought that blogging was a good idea, not having a computer of his own had resulted in him not liking to blog. He said: "No. I didn't like it much because I did not have a computer and I did not have enough time to spend in school to work on my blog. I thought the idea was brilliant but for me it came at the wrong time." It seems that although there were computer resources available for use on the university campus, this student did not spend enough time on campus to use the resources. For this student, the weblog project was an inconvenience because he did not own a computer.
- **Unreliable Internet Connection**
A student stated that the unreliable Internet connection was the reason why he disliked blogging.
- **Time Consuming**
Some students in past studies reported that one of the drawbacks of blogging is that it is time consuming (Instone, 2005; Pinkman, 2005). Similarly, two students in the present study commented that they disliked blogging for the same reason. There is a possibility that these students found blogging time consuming and an inconvenience because of the slow and unreliable Internet connection at their homes.
- **Insufficient Digital Literacy**
One student, who had only been using computers for less than a year, did not really like blogging because it was new to him and he was experiencing some difficulties while blogging. It is possible that this student is still in the process of acquiring digital skills in order to do work on weblogs.
- **Preference for Writing on Paper**
One student said that he did not like writing on weblogs and that he preferred writing on paper because he was more familiar with it. This student has been using computers for less than a year and there is likelihood that he is still getting accustomed to doing work on computers and is still in the process of acquiring digital skills.

Students Who Neither Liked nor Disliked Blogging

Two students (7.7%) reported that they neither liked nor disliked blogging. One student did not like having to blog as she felt like she was being forced to do it for a grade while another student expressed that he liked it better when he could choose his own topics to blog. The following are their comments on why they neither liked nor disliked blogging:

"I didn't like it much, but also didn't hate it because it was like being forced to do work that you never intended to do and it being for marks made it worse," Dolphy.

"So-so. It would be best if I chose my own topics. Was not easy and yet not difficult but sometimes I'd lose my patience," Ricardo.

CONCLUSION

The data from the questionnaire indicate that the students in the study generally perceived the use of weblogs for English language learning positively. They stated that weblogs increased their confidence, improved their writing skills, facilitated the sharing of ideas with their classmates, connected them with their classmates, 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. Only a handful of the learners expressed that they disliked weblogs. The reasons that they provided for disliking weblogs included not owning computers of their own, weak Internet access at their homes, time constraints, insufficient digital skills and preference for writing on paper. In addition, two other students reported that they neither liked nor disliked blogging.

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 Malaysia 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 and 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.

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