

Using a Blog to Facilitate Extensive Reading: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Research shows that extensive reading (ER) has many benefits for language acquisition. The challenge today is making ER appealing to the digital generation. For a possible solution, it is pertinent to look to the social media embraced by today's youths. This study was conducted to explore the use of the blog as a space for sharing peer-selected reading material to enhance reading motivation among English Language learners. The research questions that guided this study are whether the blog is a viable tool to facilitate ER, and how students perceive the use of this Web 2.0 tool for ER. The sample comprised two groups of students in a private university in Malaysia: 12 undergraduate students in a remedial language class and 18 students enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. A blog was set up for each group of participants to post reading materials of their choice for blog members to read over a period of 8 weeks. A questionnaire was administered at the end of the study together with focus group interviews. The qualitative approach enabled insights into process and attitudes. The results showed that the students were positive about the use of the blog for reading beyond the classroom but required tangible rewards and complementary activities to reinforce their motivation to participate. Most significantly, the results of this study indicate that the blog is a viable tool for facilitating ER.

Keywords: Blog, Extensive Reading (ER), Web 2.0

Introduction

Few language teachers today would argue about the benefits that Extensive Reading (ER) can have for the language learner. Research over the past decade underscores the usefulness and effectiveness of this reading strategy which is also referred to as 'pleasure reading' (Mikulecky, 1990 cited in Day and Bamford, 1997), and which Krashen describes as 'self-selected voluntary reading' and 'recreational reading' (2006, p.2-3). Extensive reading has been found to improve reading skills, vocabulary, spelling and writing (Krashen, 1993). In addition, ER strengthens the student's motivation to read more (Hayashi, 1999).

With such an impressive 'resume', ER should be employed in every English Language programme. Yet, the reality is that it is not. The reluctance of teachers to implement an ER programme in their classrooms has been attributed to a host of deterrent factors amongst which are cost, time constraints, and the work required to set up such a programme (Day & Bamford, 1998:46). A decade later, problems still exist. Macalister's (2010) study on the attitudes of teachers of University preparation courses in New Zealand towards ER revealed that time constraints within teaching programmes and uncertainty about university students' view of the relevance of a reading programme discouraged them from implementing ER in their institution. Another study on Taiwanese language educators highlighted logistical issues concerning the management of the process of ER (Sun, 2003). The online reading programme designed by Yu-Chih Sun (2003) to overcome the perceived problems of implementing ER among EFL learners is based on a structured system that fulfills the requirements for ER. However, it was reported that the rigid system had problems such as workload issues, inflexibility and students' aversion for writing reflection.

We posit that the implementation and effectiveness of an ER programme is not only hampered by logistical issues but also by the learners' attitudes. It is an established fact that the young people sitting in the classrooms today have grown up with technology and are called by many names including digital natives (Prensky, 2001), Millennial students (Elam, Straatton & Gibson, 2007 in Lomicka & Lord, 2009) and the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998, 2009). This group is profiled by Prensky (2001) as needing information fast, preferring random access and thriving when networked. These learners' preference for an experiential, interactive and image-rich environment (Tapscott, 1998) also indicates a gap between their text consumption habit outside the classroom and the traditional textual experiences in the classroom. Educators have to respond appropriately to the fact that the typical teenager today encounters texts that bear little resemblance to the book on a daily basis (Bigum & Lankshear, 1997, Healy, 2000, in Green & Campbell, 2003). To increase the potential of success of the ER programme, it is only logical to look to digital technology and media this generation is comfortable with for an alternative platform to the traditional approach. This study examined the use of the blog to facilitate an ER programme and is based on the rationale that the characteristics of this Web 2.0 tool can support the principles of this reading programme while avoiding some of the inhibitive problems.

Characteristics of the Weblog

The Weblog or blog is a second-generation asynchronous Internet tool that is defined as an online hypertext journal that others read and react to (Blake, 2008). Its primary purpose is to provide a space for the blogger to share writings with the online community who then respond in writing. The interface is easy to negotiate and allows pictures as well as audio and video clips to be included. The postings are displayed in

chronological order and automatically archived so that a visitor can search for and read earlier entries (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Its versatility is underscored by Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) who describe this popular Internet communication tool as a ‘dynamic place that is connected by time and topic and a frequently posted list of interesting websites, or a personal diary of events and thoughts, or a combination’. Their research on learner autonomy through blogging yielded positive results.

The blog is not a new technological platform but Lomicka and Lord (2009) rightly point out that Web 2.0 “is really an attitude and not a technology” and is about existing technologies being harnessed to do more and different things, a notion that supports this exploration of the blog for enhancing reading rather than writing which would be closer to its original purpose. There are sufficient reasons to support the idea of using the blog as a repository for authentic target-language resources easily sourced from the Internet. Setting up a blog for a class of students to share reading materials requires minimal time and cost. The blog can be accessed anywhere using any device that allows connection to the Internet such as laptops, tablet computers and mobile phones. The collaboration made possible through an easy to access platform such as a social networking tool like the weblog could create a supportive social climate that helps motivate the learner to participate in ER.

The blog and the key elements of ER

Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) offer 10 principles for ER which deals with the characteristics of ER and the conditions and methodology needed for its success. How the blog is able to support each of these principles is explained below:

1. The reading material must be easy

The reading material would be selected by the students for the students. It is logical to assume that the chosen reading materials would be filtered and deemed accessible to the target audience. This implies that the materials posted in the blog would be comprehensible to the members.

2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.

The blog members would have the Internet as a resource for reading material. There is no question about the Internet being a rich resource of a vast variety of reading material. According to a Web server survey conducted by Internet Services company Netcraft in August 2011, there are more than 460 million websites in existence. Not only do these sites supply text on every topic imaginable but they also provide a wide variety of text types including comics, jokes and video clips which are the staple fare of the visual-hungry digital natives (Prensky, 2001).

3. Learners choose what they want to read.

The blog would serve as a repository of reading materials deemed interesting and suitable for reading by the learners themselves. The process requires participants to first choose from what they enjoyed reading to share on the blog, and then to select from the shared materials what they want to read. Freedom of choice is exercised at two points of the process. Not only would they choose what they want to read but they would also recommend what they enjoy reading to their friends. Hence, the materials are peer-selected and self-selected.

4. Learners read as much as possible.

The task of sharing reading material on the blog would ensure that students read for two purposes. First, the students have to search for reading material to share. In other words, they have to read the material to determine its suitability for sharing. Next, they are instructed to read what other members have posted which provides for more reading. This time, it is a more 'conscious' reading exercise.

5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.

The Internet allows for easy access to a wide variety of reading materials. With the freedom of choice that the participants are given, they would naturally look for what interests them and gives them pleasure.

6. Reading is its own reward.

The blog is for students to read and share what they read so that they can read even more. There are no structured activities or comprehension and language exercises to interfere with the reading activity itself. It is believed that learners will derive both pleasure and language benefits from reading the blog posts.

7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.

If the reading material is interesting and easy to understand, the reader will read faster. Again, this is made possible by virtue of the resource being the Internet and the 'chooser' being a peer who likely has similar interests and language ability.

8. Reading is individual and silent.

Participating in this blogging activity requires the students to read outside the classroom at their own pace and leisure. When to read and how much to read is left entirely to the individual. Although the students are instructed to post at least once a week and to read at least half of what is posted as a guide, they are under no duress as there is no strict monitoring or accounting involved.

9. Teachers orient and guide their students

This study focused on the use of a Web 2.0 tool in ER and sought to examine its efficacy in motivating students to read. Orientation and guidance were provided at the initial stage of the experiment. Thereafter, the instructor kept in the background, surfacing when necessary to give verbal encouragement to the class to continue participating.

10. The teacher as a role model of a reader.

For ER to be effective, the teacher is expected to blaze the trail for the students. With a reading blog, the instructor can easily access what the students are reading and read what they read. The students will see the instructor's comments on the posts which can be an incentive to them to read as well.

Theoretically, the blog could help eliminate the deterrent factors that make language practitioners shy away from ER. It is then necessary to examine it from the practical perspective. Is the blog viable as a platform for an ER programme? Can it support the characteristics of ER?

The other dimension that needs to be assessed in relation to the practicability of using this online social network tool is the users' perception and attitude. The learners' receptiveness towards using what they regard as a social medium for academic purposes is important to the successful implementation of the programme.

Methodology

This study explored the use of the blog as a space for language learners to share reading materials for the purpose of Extensive Reading. The primary focus of the study is to examine the viability of the blog in facilitating ER and to gain insights into the perception of the participants towards the use of this social network platform for ER. This paper employs the qualitative approach with a detailed explanation of the findings from the questionnaire administered and the focus group interviews conducted.

The Participants

The study involved two groups of students at a private university in Malaysia. The groups were taught by one of the researchers in two separate semesters. Twelve students in a remedial English language programme made up the first group. They were a multinational group made up of students from Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar and China, with Indonesians having the largest representation (7). These first year degree students majoring in information technology and computer science were enrolled in the language programme to raise their proficiency from pre-intermediate to intermediate level. The programme was an intensive 12-hour per week course that focused on language skills. The second group consisted of 18 students in a foundation

programme. They consisted of Malaysians with those of Chinese descent making up two-thirds of the group. The students were taking Technical English, an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course which was a core subject meant to equip them with language skills relevant to their specialism. Their English language proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced levels.

Procedure

The objective of the planned extensive reading programme was first explained to each group. The blog for the Remedial English class was created by the instructor using Blogger, a free blog-publishing platform, and given the name CPE Readers Club. The ESP group created their own blog using WordPress, another popular free blog publishing tool. The group came up with their own name for the blog – Techreaders.

The participants were instructed to post materials in their respective blogs for their course mates to read for a period of eight weeks. The guidelines for participation were also posted in both the blogs.

GUIDELINES FOR MEMBERS

You can...

...share articles, news, comics, stories, poems, jokes & riddles

You should...

...provide a brief description of what you want to share

...post something at least once a week

...read at least half of what has been posted

...comment on what you have read

You must not...

...post material with sensitive content (e.g. about politics or religion)

...post pictures without text

Figure 1: Guidelines for members of the blogs (Extracted from: <http://cpe-readers.blogspot.com/>)

The students were allowed to select any form of reading material to fulfill the ‘freedom of choice’ aspect of ER. Evidence that they had read a post was derived from their comments. They were allowed to respond very briefly to avoid deterring them from reading. If they were required to write at length, it could be perceived as too much work which was the case with the Taiwanese students using the ERO system (Sun, 2003).

The wide variety of Web content that is easily accessible also necessitated defining perimeters for this activity. Hence, there was the reminder to avoid materials of a sensitive or offensive nature such as politics and religion.

The lecturer planned to stay invisible and remain a passive observer throughout the eight weeks, only giving verbal reminders to the class to keep posting and reading. This was to minimize the influence of external factors and maintain the study’s focus on the use of the social media platform.

Feedback and Evaluation

A post-study questionnaire focused on gaining information on the students’ participation (frequency in posting and reading), the procedure involved (how they looked for reading material and how easy or hard it was), their feelings about the activity of posting and reading, and their opinion of the blog (whether it needed improvement, how to motivate students to participate and its usefulness, effectiveness and relevance to language learning).

Seven students who formed the focus group were also interviewed. The focus of the interview was for a more in-depth examination of the students' understanding of ER and its benefits, their views of reading on the Net, the collaboration aspect of the reading blog, and their level of involvement. The students were also asked to voice their opinions of the blog. These seven represent the spectrum of participants – from the active participants to the observer.

Findings

The viability of the blog for facilitating ER

The results of this experiment are presented from the viewpoint of how they support the ten ER principles (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002). The approach adopted in this study required the reading material to be selected by the students for the students. The participants reported that they evaluated what they read for suitability in terms of level of difficulty and appeal before sharing it. A focus group member described the process involved in selecting reading materials succinctly: “Two steps – browsing and coming across something worth sharing, ask ‘Is it appropriate to share?’ Yes? Then post.” This implies that the materials deposited in the blog were comprehensible to the members and therefore supports the principle that reading material has to be easy.

The participants who reported that it was easy to look for reading material comprised 46 per cent. Of these, half said it was because of the Internet which makes available a wide range of reading material (principle number 2). However, there were five students who found the task difficult of deciding what to share with their friends on the blog. There were also a couple of students from the Remedial class who said they

had difficulty understanding what they read on the Internet. This narrowed down their options for what to share which made this part of the programme difficult.

Freedom of choice was central to the whole experience. The participants were free to select any reading material to share within the set perimeters. They could decide whose posts to read, when, where and how to read, and also whether to respond and comment or not. In this liberated environment it was found that the main criterion used by 46 per cent of the participants to pick what to post was peer influence. Another 18 per cent specified that they looked for humorous materials that would make the others happy. They had a clear sense of the audience when they selected what would interest their friends rather than what interested them. The outcome was 86 per cent of the participants reported that they enjoyed reading the peer selected materials on the blog. Also significant is the fact that over two-thirds of the participants maintained that they enjoyed looking for materials to share with their friends. About a third of this group said they gained new information and knowledge from this exercise. This observation is also relevant to the fifth principle which relates the nature of the reading materials and the participants' interests. Clearly, pleasure, information and general understanding form the basis of the students' decision making.

The 2-stage approach which required students to first read to search and post, and then to read the shared materials increased the learners' exposure to texts. Forty per cent of the students contributed to the content in the blog at least once a week. Sixty per cent of the members read the blog at least once a week. These participants had the opportunity to read as much as possible which supports the fourth principle of ER.

The experiment yielded two significant results that relate to the principle that reading is its own reward. The first is that the participants did enjoy both the reading to search stage and reading the blog stage. However, more participants (86%) reported that they enjoyed reading their friends' posts at the blog stage than those who liked reading at the search stage (68%). The second discovery was unexpected. Although reading was perceived to be academically rewarding, a number of participants (18 per cent) felt that some form of activity such as discussion or language exercise based on the posted material would have motivated them to be more active on the blog. Even more surprising was the suggestion by 25 per cent of the participants that some prize or token be offered as an added incentive to the readers.

Fulfillment of the seventh principle can be inferred from the participants' affirmative responses about their enjoyment when reading the posts on the blog. A significant percentage (86%) reported that they enjoyed reading the shared materials.

The eighth principle states that ER has to be individual and silent. The students read at their own pace during their free time. The largest group (32%) read the blog at least once a week while the second largest group (29%) read whenever they felt like it which varied between twice a week to once in 2 weeks. They maintained that the frequency of their reading activity depended on whether the materials were interesting and whether they had free time.

The last two principles of ER emphasize the role of the instructor. In this study, the lecturer explained the objectives of ER and introduced the blog as the platform for the programme. Guidelines and rules of conduct were given and then posted on the blog as a permanent reference for the blog members thereby meeting the ninth principle.

The researcher deviated from the tenth principle which requires the teacher to be a role model of a reader for the reasons already explained in the previous section of this report. In the first part of the study which involved the Remedial Class, the instructor kept in the background throughout as planned, reading the posts but withholding comment. This was to find out whether the students were motivated by the social media platform to keep the momentum they had. It was observed that by the fourth week, that is, mid-way through the experiment, the posts became less frequent and activity slowed down. A number of the participants expressed their wish to see the lecturer involved in posting reading materials, and initiating discussion of what was posted.

With this discovery, the instructor played a more active role in the blog for the ESP class in the following semester. However, that role was limited to reading and commenting on what was read. The teacher abstained from posting reading material so as to maintain the learners' freedom of choice of reading material. This is based on the rationale that any material selected by the teacher would be obligatory reading for the students. It was found that the students preferred the teacher to be even more active. One student felt that the blog members became less motivated with time and stronger leadership would have restored interest.

Students' perception of the blog as a tool for ER

The students viewed the use of the blog for this reading programme favorably. Feedback on the effects and benefits of using this approach was obtained via the post-study questionnaire and focus group interview.

Usefulness and Effectiveness in supporting language learning

Three quarters of the participants felt that every English class should have a reading blog. They specifically said that it would help improve their reading and writing skills, vocabulary and general language. There were a few detractors (14%), however, who thought the reading blog was ineffective or uninteresting.

Effect on motivation to read

On whether the blog motivated the students not only to read more, but to read more carefully and purposefully, the focus group were unanimously affirmative on all points. All the focus group members thought that it was a more interesting way to read. One said it was fun while another explained that the collection of reading materials on the blog allowed her to encounter new kinds of reading materials that she would otherwise not read. A more comprehensive explanation was offered by one member of the focus group: "We are the Y Gen. Content flows faster on the Net and so better captures interest. I cannot see people needing books any more."

One of the reasons for the participants' liking the reading blog has to do with the design of the blog. They liked the versatility of the blog which allowed the design to be changed, the attractiveness of the design and the user-friendly interface.

Benefits from collaboration

Of the 86 per cent who enjoyed reading the posts in the blog, three quarters gave reasons that point to the social aspect of the blog. The responses of ten of the students reveal a consciousness of their relationship to the other participants. For example, two participants said they appreciated the hard work put in by their friends to find materials to share with them. Eighteen per cent of the participants endorsed the blog because it let them share their knowledge and also reading materials that interest them with their friends which is further evidence of the advantage of the collaborative aspect of this social online platform. One of the students interviewed reinforced this idea saying that the blog gave them a greater sense of community. Another student stated that the Internet is so 'huge' that it is not easy to look for specific knowledge, but with the reading blog, others did the searching and posted materials that advanced his knowledge.

Ideas for improving the reading blog

Although a decisive proportion of the students reported that they approved of the reading blog, it was observed that they did not participate as actively as they should. Their responses to the questionnaire items about what would have made the blog more effective plus input from the focus group indicated where the problems were.

A surprising 25 per cent of the students thought that a reward such as a prize, gift or token would motivate students to participate in the blog. Another 21 per cent suggested that the design of the blog be improved further. Complementary activities such as quizzes, contests, brain teasers, discussion and even exercises were thought to encourage more participation. Five participants mentioned that the lecturer needed to

be more active and to motivate them. One of the focus group members pointed out the need for more 'leadership' in the ER programme. The lecturer's participation was cited by several students to be a source of motivation. In addition the posts themselves were said to augment reader engagement if they contained humour, pictures, music and videos.

One of the focus group members who was not as enthusiastic about the reading blog as his counterparts suggested that linking the blog to Facebook would generate more interest and attract more participation. Another focus group member echoed this sentiment with the rationale that Facebook is so popular with these young people that linking this social network to the blog would help reduce the *academic-ness* of the activity and remove the pressure of perceived expectations from both peers and instructor, thus making this approach to ER more casual and engaging.

Conclusion

This exploratory study confirms that the blog is a useful and viable platform for supporting an ER programme. Its benefits are derived from allowing easy access to a vast resource of reading materials to cater to the diversified interests of a group of learners and the convenience and ease with which a group can select reading materials and deposit them in a common space for members to exercise the free will to read, not to read or to read again.

The students' favorable perception towards this social networking tool is another important endorsement for this alternative approach to ER. This study confirms that the use of this Web 2.0 tool appeals to this representative group of the Net Generation because it permits them to collaborate with their peers and to share their interests in the form of text. In the words of one of the participants, this generation "crave[s] their fellowmen's approval more than anything else" and they "by nature like to share and know about each other".

While this Web 2.0 platform appears to have passed the test as a tool as an alternative approach to a traditional language learning enhancement programme, there are some concerns that need appropriate response and further examination. One such issue is the difficulty faced by the learner in selecting reading materials.

In spite of, or perhaps it is more accurate to say *because of*, the huge resource of online reading materials, searching for reading materials to share was not as enjoyable as reading what was shared especially among the lower proficiency group. Hence, having too many options is also a deterrent. A possible solution is to provide a list of

recommended websites for those learners who need assistance at this stage of the programme while still allowing the rest who are more adept at Web searching to go beyond that list.

Contrary to Bhattacharya and Chauhan's (2010) research findings, the results of this study have debunked the idea that this interactive online platform could make the learner more independent and responsible in their learning. The warning by Day and Bamford (1998, p.126) concerning the lack of encouragement and concern on the part of the instructor would definitely lead to diminished interest and participation in an ER programme was found to be valid. Evidently, the use of the Web 2.0 resource does not eliminate the need for the teacher or lecturer's catalytic role. In spite of the accessibility, convenience and appeal of this online platform that encourages autonomous learning, the students were still unable to abandon their need or preference for traditional hand-holding. The use of the blog for ER was found to have minimum impact on learner autonomy which is evident in the students' preference for more active participation by the lecturer, structured activities to accompany the reading and some form of reward for their participation.

Further investigation is recommended especially on how and whether using the weblog and other social networking sites can significantly increase the effectiveness of ER in improving language. Once it can be established that the online platform can support the ER programme in all aspects of language learning, it could provide language instructors with an alternative approach that would help remove the reservations currently impeding the implementation of this worthwhile programme.

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