

Learners' Perceptions on the Use of Blogs for EFL Learning

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This study attempted to discover learners' perceptions on the use of blogs for EFL (English as a foreign language) learning. Participants were 49 first-year university students from Southern Taiwan and were divided into ten groups in the study. Students in a group read the articles posted in the teacher's blog and collaboratively wrote group reflections using their group blog. A post-blogging survey was administered to elicit participants' perceptions on the use of blogs. The results of the surveys suggested that most of the students positively perceived the use of blogs for EFL learning. Only few students responded to the use of blogs negatively. The results also revealed that blogs have the potential for developing reading and writing skills. More detailed results and discussion are presented in the paper. Some pedagogical implications are also provided. For instance, teachers are suggested to post appropriate reading materials in the blog based on students' English abilities. In addition, if students are not used to using blogs, it is suggested that students could complete blogging tasks in class rather than after class.

Keywords: blogs, learners' perceptions, EFL (English as a foreign language) learning, writing, reading

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in using blogs in the area of L2 (second/foreign language) learning (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). However, because of the newness of the technology (Ellison & Wu, 2008), the literature on blogs in L2 learning was just beginning to surface (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Lee, 2006). Therefore, to fill the gap, more empirical studies should be conducted in this field to determine the effectiveness of integrating blogs in L2 learning. The present study was conducted to contribute to the body of literature. It aimed at discovering learners' perceptions on the use of blogs for EFL (English as a foreign language) learning.

Literature Review

In the literature review, the technologies and blogs are first introduced. Then, the research on blogs in L2 learning is discussed.

Blog

Blog (i.e., weblog) is a type of web application that displays serial entries with date and time stamps. Entries are usually presented in reverse chronological order with most recent first (Thorne & Payne, 2005). Blogs also possess some features that might help facilitate L2 learning.

First, blogs are easy to use. For example, after finishing editing a new post or writing a comment in a blog

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platform, the post and comment can be instantly published in the cyberspace with a click of the submit button. In addition, blogs can automatically archive the posts in the reverse chronological order with the dates stamped, and it is easy to find past works (Peng, 2008). As blog technology is easy to use for both instructors and learners, the application of blogs in the educational field is becoming increasingly popular (Huang, 2007). Second, blogs have much to offer to literacy. Some researchers, such as Ducate and Lomicka (2008), Godwin-Jones (2006) and Huffaker (2005), have claimed that blogs represent both reading and writing activities by their nature and pages, and therefore, they are perfect media for developing reading and writing skills. Third, blogs facilitate interaction and collaboration (Godwin-Jones, 2003). What distinguishes blogs from webpages is the possibility of interaction and collaboration. Webpage communication is usually one side, while blogs invite two and more sided communication (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008). Furthermore, with the ease of commenting immediately, blogs are able to enhance interaction between the author and multiple audiences. Researchers thought highly of the function, because collaborative learning could be attained through it (Huffaker, 2005).

Research on Blogs in L2 Learning

To understand whether blogs are really beneficial for L2 learning, it is important to know the findings of the previous studies conducted to investigate the effectiveness of applying blogs in the L2 contexts. Among these studies, some of them attempted to discover students' affective responses (e.g., perceptions, beliefs, attitude, feelings, reaction, etc.) to the use of blogs for L2 learning. The findings of these studies are presented as follows.

de Almeida Soares (2008) explored nine pre-intermediate EFL Brazilian students' perceptions of the value of using blogs as a part of their English learning. The three-month exploratory practice was carried out. The findings suggested that the students viewed blogs as learning tools for them and blogs helped their English. Another study by Armstrong and Retterer (2008) investigated the use of blogs at an intermediate level in Spanish class. Sixteen students in the class were writing online by means of the blogs. By the end of the semester, most students expressed that they liked writing the blogs. They found that blogging was an appealing way to communicate in a foreign language. The overall experience of blogging proved to be a positive one for the students. The study by Jones (2006) sought to examine ESL (English as a second language) students' perceptions regarding the implementation of blogs in the writing classes. The participants were five students who used blogs for four aspects of the writing process: peer responding, editing, revising and publishing their writing assignments. The data from interviews, open-ended questions, surveys and students' reflective journals showed that the students all liked the blogging aspect of the class for writing tasks, and therefore, responded positively to the use of blogs. Ducate and Lomicka (2008) reported on students' reactions to blogging based on a year-long project in which students learning French or German as a L2 involved in reading blogs at the first semester and writing blogs at the second semester. Data from students' blogs, reports, surveys and interviews of focus group suggested that students enjoyed the process of blogging and would like to continue to use the blog as a learning tool in their future target language classes. In Ward's study (2004), 40 participants were asked to read each others' blogs and give comments. A survey concerning the effectiveness of using blogs as learning tools was distributed. The majority of the students preferred writing the blogs to writing the traditional journals and believed that writing on blogs can improve English.

Despite of these studies pointing to a positive view regarding students' affective responses to the use of

blogs for L2 learning, there are still some studies reporting on a more negative view. For example, Wu (2005) used blogs in two of his freshman English classes. One constituted English majors and the other consisted of non-English majors. A blog survey was distributed to both classes at the end of the semester. The analysis of the survey showed that blogs were still not well-known at the time. Therefore, students rarely posted entries on their blogs. In addition, because students felt that they did not update frequently enough or they did not have the confidence or willingness to share ideas with friends, not many of them invited their friends to read their blogs. Another study by Chiao (2006) reported similar findings. Students' attitudes and opinions toward learning in using a blog-based system were investigated. Data in the study were the transcripts of teacher-student interviews as well as the feedbacks from the questionnaires. The analysis of the data revealed that, due to lack of assurance and their defenses of privacy, most students posted less than five articles in the entire semester.

After a review of the research on learners' affective responses to the use of blogs in L2 contexts, one gap was identified. That is, the results of the previous studies are inconsistent. Some studies suggested that students enjoyed blogging and perceived blogs as useful learning tools which helped their learning in the target language (e.g., de Almeida Soares, 2008; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Jones, 2006; Ward, 2004). Yet, in some studies, students were not positively and actively involved in the use of blogs (e.g., Chiao, 2006; Wu, 2005). As a result, to fill this gap, more researches addressing this issue need to be conducted to obtain more conclusive findings about how L2 students respond to the use of blogs affectively.

The Present Study

This paper reported on a part of the findings of a large study, which empirically investigated the efficacy of applying blogs as collaborative tools for EFL reading and writing as well as examined students' perceptions on the use of blogs. In the present study, learners' perceptions of using blogs were particularly explored to respond to the gap identified in the literature discussed above.

Method

Participants

One class of 49 first-year college students studying EFL from a private university in Taiwan participated in the study. They all enrolled in an English reading course in the first semester of 2009. Among the participants, 35 (71%) were females and 14 (29%) were males. Their mean age was 20.

Before participants began to use blogs in this study, a pre-blogging survey was administered to understand participants' knowledge about blogs. There were four questions in the survey: (1) Do you own a computer? (2) Do you know what a blog is? (3) Do you visit blogs often? And (4) Do you have a blog? The results showed that almost all participants ($N = 47$; $p = 95.8\%$) had a computer. Only two of them did not have one. To participate in the study, the two participants were instructed to use the computers in the computer lab of the university. The results also showed that there were no participants who had no clues about what a blog is; most of them ($N = 40$; $p = 83.3\%$) had a blog; more than half of them ($N = 25$; $p = 52.1\%$) visited blogs frequently. These responses suggested that many participants were familiar with blogs prior to the study.

Data Collection

Before the study began, participants were given an informed consent form. Participants who signed their names on the consent form started to participate in this study. The period of data collection was six weeks.

During the first week, a pre-blogging survey was administered to the students. After completing the survey, 49 students were randomly divided into groups of four to five. Each group was asked to create a group blog. The teacher also created her own blog, in which the links of all group blogs were included. Each group could find other group blogs easily through accessing to the teacher blog. The teacher and students created their own blogs through the Website <http://www.wretch.cc/>. This blog provider was selected because it was free and easy to use. From the second week to the fifth week, the teacher posted one reading article in her own blog every week. Students in a group needed to read the article in the teacher blog, and then, collaboratively wrote a group reflection with at least 50 words. Finally, they posted their group reflections in their group blog. Each group was also encouraged to comment on the reflections produced by other groups. Students completed the blogging task after class instead of during the class meeting. In the sixth week, a post-blogging survey was administered to the students. The data collection ended after all students completed the survey.

Instrument

The instruments used in the study were the pre-blogging survey and post-blogging survey. The former contained six fixed-response questions. Four questions helped understand participants' knowledge about blogs. The results have been reported in the above section on "Participants". The post-blogging survey was composed of five open-ended questions. These questions attempted to gauge participants' perceptions on: (1) their reading abilities; (2) writing abilities after blogging; (3) the ease of use for blogs; (4) the sociability in the blog environment; and (5) the willingness of keeping using blogs.

Data Analysis

Participants' responses to the pre-blogging and post-blogging surveys were analyzed through descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Furthermore, in the post-blogging survey, all participants responded to the five open-ended questions with one phrase or one short sentence. Therefore, in each of the questions, the researcher read and reread their short responses carefully, and grouped their responses into several categories. The responses with different wordings but similar meanings were all grouped into one category. A number was presented in parentheses after each category to indicate the number of the responses that were grouped into the category. The quotes of participants' own words in each category were not presented because their responses were short and similar to each other. Nevertheless, if the response could not be classified into any of the categories, it was then presented in the form of a quotation.

Results and Discussion

This study attempted to discover how learners perceived the use of blogs for EFL learning. Their perceptions could be realized through their responses to the five open-ended questions in the post-blogging survey.

Regarding the first question, "Did reading blogs help improve your English reading skills? In what way?", the results showed that 40 (82%) students felt that reading blogs has helped improve their English reading skills, because they learned some new vocabularies (19); they could read in English faster and more fluently (19); their grammar was improved (3); their reading comprehension was enhanced (2). Only nine (18%) students did not feel any changes about their English reading skills after reading blogs for four weeks. One of the students made the response: "Reading blogs had no influence on my reading skills".

As for the second question, "Did writing blogs help improve your English writing skills? In what way?", the results indicated that 31 (63%) students felt that writing blogs has helped improve their English writing

skills, because they could write in English more fluently (4); their grammar was improved (14); they used the vocabulary that they did not use before (2); the sentence structure in their writing was improved (2); they could think more carefully before writing (2); they began to think of if there is any grammatical mistake in a sentence (2). Two of the 31 students felt that: "It helped me to write more sentences and learn how to use grammar and tenses."; "I know how to use appropriate words in the writing". Only 18 (37%) students did not feel that their English writing was improved. One of the students stated: "If I have already had difficulty in English writing, I would have the same difficulty even though I write through computers".

Students' perceptions on the efficacy of reading and writing blogs on their English reading and writing skills found in the present study helped confirm Ducate and Lomica's (2008) and Godwin-Jones's (2006) claims, that blogs have much to offer to literacy and blogs themselves represented both reading and writing activities.

In terms of the third question, "Do you consider using blogs to be easy or difficult? Why?", the results indicated that 41 (84%) students considered using blogs to be easy because it was easy to learn how to use blogs (4); blogs were not complicated (11); using blogs was just like typing (3); they used blogs before (4); they used blogs often (9). Two of the 41 students felt that: "I just need to type the words on the blog and click the button of submit" and "I know how to use a blog because it clearly shows us how to use it". Only five (10%) students thought it was difficult to use blogs because blogs were complicated and hard to explore (2); they rarely used blogs (2). One of the five participants felt: "It's difficult to read articles through the computer. It's tired for my eyes". Three (6%) participants made neutral responses to the ease and difficulty of the blog. One of them said, "I know how to post articles and pictures on the blog, but it is hard to read articles through the computer".

The result, showing that almost all students considered using blogs to be easy, suggested that blogs possess the feature of "ease of use". The findings supported Peng's (2008) and Huang's (2007) claims that blog technology is easy to use.

With respect to the fourth question, "How did you feel about using blogs for learning English collaboratively with group members? Why?", the results indicated that 35 (71%) students had positive feelings about using blogs for learning English collaboratively. Most of them felt good about it (28); some felt happy about it (3); some felt it was cool (2); still some felt it was interesting (2). These students thought in the blog environment they were able to interact with group members (7), they could discuss together (13); many people can learn together (8); they could understand different viewpoints by reading other groups' reflections and comments (4); they could make progress together (2); team cohesiveness was promoted (5); they were able to chat, which promoted feelings among group members (2). This study found that none of the students had negative feelings about learning English collaboratively in the blog environment. However, 14 (29%) students felt so-so about learning English collaboratively via blogs. Two of the students made the responses. One said: "Each of us was assigned to complete one group reflection and one comment. We wrote individually, so there was not much feeling about interaction". The other said: "It was a little inconvenient. If the group member did not use the computer, it is impossible for discussion to take place".

The result, showing that many students had positive feelings about using blogs for learning English collaboratively, suggested that blogs have the possibility of interaction and collaboration. Some students expressed that in the blog environment, they could interact with each other and discuss together, which substantiated Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, and Nierlich's (2008) claim that blogs invite two and more sided communication. In addition, some students expressed that they could understand other people's points of

view by reading the reflection and the comments on the blogs, which supported Huffaker's (2005) claim that blogs enhance interaction between the author and multiple audience with the ease of commenting.

Finally, the fifth question is "Will you continue to use your group blog in the future? Why/why not?". The results showed that 37 (76%) students expressed that they would continue to use their group blog in the future, because using group blogs was helpful for learning English (4); helped improve their reading (7); was interesting (2); increased the opportunity of practicing English (2). In addition, they felt that they could have more interaction with group members (3). Three of the 31 students made other responses. One said, "It is a good way of learning". Another said: "It is a good learning tool". The other said: "It keeps up with the times". However, nine (18%) students would not continue to maintain their group blog because they thought it was a troublesome matter (2); they thought they sometimes did not have time to use blogs, and thus, could not join the discussion (2); they thought there was no interaction (2). Three (6%) students had neutral responses. Two of them expressed that they might keep it if they had time. The other said, "It depends on circumstances".

The result, showing that most of the students would continue to use their group blogs, suggested that these students might have positive experience of using group blogs. The findings are consistent with those of Ducate and Lomicka (2008), whose study found that students enjoyed the process of blogging and would like to continue to use blogs. The findings are also similar to those of Jones (2006) and Armstrong and Rettern (2008), whose studies uncovered that students responded positively to the use of blogs and the overall experience of blogging was a positive one for the students. Particularly, some students expressed that blogs were helpful for learning English and were good learning tools, which is consonant with the findings of de Almeida Soares (2008), whose study found that students viewed blogs as learning tools and blogs helped their English.

Pedagogical Implications

Some pedagogical implications are provided based on the findings of the study. For instance, students in the study were required to use blogs after class meetings. This task was undoubtedly an extra workload for the students who did not have the habits of using blogs prior to the study. Furthermore, the articles posted in the teacher blog were not the ones that the teacher taught in class. They were from *Chicken Soup for Preteen Soul*, which was not the textbook the teacher used in class. Therefore, to complete the blogging task, students had extra readings to read. All of these reasons could explain the reason why several students were not willing to continue to use group blogs. To help students have positive experience of using group blogs and motivate students to keep using blogs, teachers might consider having students use group blogs synchronously during the class meetings, if students are not used to using blogs for EFL learning. When students are familiar with the use of blogs as learning tools, teachers can let students use blogs both in class and after class meetings. As students are more used to the use of blogs and they have no difficulty in using blogs to work collaboratively in groups, teachers could have students completely use blogs after class meetings.

In addition, regarding the readings posted in the teacher blog, teachers might post the articles that students learn in class at the beginning. Once students are used to reading articles through blogs, teachers could consider posting the readings that students do not learn in class. In the study, each of the articles posted in the teacher blog consisted of the words ranging from 1,000 to 1,600 words. However, several students expressed that they felt uncomfortable with reading blogs, because they needed to spend a long time reading these articles through computers, suggesting that these articles might be too difficult for the students. Therefore, when teachers plan to post the readings that are not taught in class, it is important to select the extra readings based on students'

English reading abilities. If the students do not have strong reading abilities, the content of the extra readings should not be too long. However, as students make progress in their English reading over time, teachers could consider posting the readings of longer content in the teacher blog. In this way, students might not have to spend much time staring at the computer just to finish reading one article and, therefore, they would be more willing to read through blogs and to participate in writing blogs.

Conclusions and Limitations

The present study investigated students' perceptions of using blogs for EFL learning. The results suggested that most of the students perceived the use of blogs positively after using blogs for four weeks. For example, they felt that blogs were easy to use. They also had positive feelings about using blogs for learning English collaboratively, and they would continue to use group blogs in the future. The results also revealed that blogs have the potential for literacy advance, because students felt that reading and writing blogs helped improve their reading and writing abilities. Nevertheless, in the study, there were still several students who responded to the use of blogs negatively. Teachers are suggested to post proper reading materials in the blog based on students' English ability. In addition, it is also recommended that teachers could have students complete blogging tasks in class rather than after class if students are not used to using blogs.

There are some limitations in the study. To begin with, only a class of 49 college EFL students from a private university in Taiwan participated in the study. The findings of the study might not be generalized to the whole EFL context due to the small sample size. Moreover, only using surveys to elicit learners' perceptions is another potential limitation. Researchers are suggested to adopt more methods, such as interviews, observations and students' reflective journals, to obtain more thorough understanding about learners' perceptions. Because of the limitations, the findings of the study need to be interpreted with caution.

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