Exploring Instructors' Rationale and Perspectives in Using Blogs as a Tool for Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Embedding web-based learning systems in education has drawn increasing popularity and growing interest among the contemporary language education community in recent time. In particular, blogs have become a profound phenomenon in the present landscape of online education. However, research addressing the instructor's perspective about the engagement of blog technology in second language education is still lagging behind. The current study seeks to explore and survey the perspectives of six Malaysian academicians on the use of blogs in teaching English as second language to Malaysian students at higher education institutions. A qualitative approach was adopted to collect responses from the participants via a semi-structured interview. In addition, a checklist of features of the blog was used to investigate the blogging activities in the courses conducted by the participants. The collected data from the interview were analyzed qualitatively, whereas the blog checklist data were analyzed quantitatively. The obtained results indicated that the surveyed instructors had a positive reflection on using blogs in the teaching and learning of the English as second language.

Keywords: web-based learning, blogs, instructor's perspective, blog checklist data

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the adoption of Internet in education is constantly increasing with more technologically educated teachers entering the education field. Many of these new comers may not be aware of the pedagogical impacts of technology and the underlined challenges of using blogs in their daily teaching due to shortage in knowledge or experience, specifically when considering the Malaysian environment. In addition, the use of blogs in second language education is perceived as rather new and advanced in the Malaysian education system, and it is yet in its developing state, worthy of scientific exploration and analysis. Studies reporting the instructor bloggers community in Malaysia: its size, background and experiences, are scarce, if not absent, and therefore, the need to shed the light on such community type of teachers is in a high demand. Furthermore, research among Malaysian academicians involved in blog-based English language education is still lagging behind (Izaham, 2008; Ismail, Ratan, Elias, & Mohd, 2015, Zarie & Supyan, 2016) and, therefore, the outcomes of their experiences and personal perspectives are not known nor communicated to other educators and researchers who want to explore, learn or apply the technology. Consequently, the knowledge on embedding blogs in language teaching and learning in the Malaysian situation remains unexplored widely.

To fill the gap in knowledge and diffuse awareness among Malaysian educationists on the potentials of educational blogs, there is an imperative need to survey the instructor bloggers community in Malaysia and report the personal experiences of those teachers already or had been working with blogs in order to extract information and generalizations, and formulate a better knowledge on the present status of educational blogs in the country; on the different approaches of practicing blogging in class; on the pedagogical outcomes; and the challenges as well as strength and deficiency points of blog usage in second language education. When this information from instructor bloggers is researched, reported and communicated, other non-blogging instructors will learn about the potentials of blog technology and applications in second language education and this may motivate some enthusiastic teachers to adopt blogs in their pedagogical practice to enhance their teaching methodologies.

2. Literature Review

Among various Web technologies applied in education, recent trends indicate that network application of blogging is increasingly being accepted as transformational instructional technology tool in universities and schools (Supyan, 2008; Churchill, 2009; Yeh, 2010). Blogs become a profound figure in the present Internet landscape, and due to their distinctive features which set them apart from early asynchronous discussion technologies (Ellison & Wu, 2008), they have lately drawn attention in the academic arena (Churchill, 2009; Ismail, Soo, & Ismail, 2015). Contrary to formal media outlets, blogs provide unlimited opportunities for people to present, publish, and express oneself online and communicate, exchange and share knowledge, reflect, and debate with others away from censorship and editorial restrictions. Blogs are easily created, updated, maintained and automated without prior knowledge of HTML programming. They are fiercely flexible, customizable tools that are capable to reach a wider platform of Internet community and share information on updated news and topics of interest on real-time and free of charge. In the education context, blogs promote active student centered learning (Beale, 2007). They provide students, instructors and faculty staff the opportunity to share and acquire knowledge from each other and discuss issues beyond textbooks and coursework in an autonomous, open forum environment (Zawilinski, 2009). This, in turn, supports a sense of community amongst these target groups (Beale, 2007). Furthermore, experience in virtual teaching through Internet indicates that blogs help students in learning and developing their study skills faster than traditional in-class techniques (Wang & Hsua, 2008; Zawilinski, 2009).

Students find blogging useful and an effective addition to their learning (Beale, 2007) because the technology enables them to make contributions to the class, promotes peer learning, and encourages quality in work (Ismail, Ratan, Elias, & Mohd, 2015). When the instructor integrates blogs in classroom, students became self-directed, motivated to learn collaboratively, independent thinkers and rely minimally on their instructor. With blogs, students were not learning in isolation; instead, they approached, communicated and socialized with other people of diversified background. Shy and struggling students were more encouraged to participate in learning activities when they were given the opportunity to express themselves in blogs (Ismail, Ratan, Elias, & Mohd, 2015). Students adopting blogs demonstrated a noticeable ability in engaging fully with the topic of their studies, processing new knowledge in their own way and synthesizing the learning outcomes in a manner more appropriate to their learning style. When students authored or commented and posted entries in their blogs or in peer-to-peer debating blogs, they tended to use, read and quote from accessible research sources beyond the classroom context (e.g. library books, magazines, interviews, Internet, surveys, reports, etc.). This means that during this process of knowledge acquisition and sharing, the students were automatically learning to use higher order thinking skills and practicing inquiry-based learning activities. This, in turn, casts into enhancing students' education by reflective practice (Soo, Hasan, Jangga, & Mat, 2015; Beale, 2007; Zawilinski, 2009).

Blogs promoted constructivist learning, provided reinforcement and increased accountability (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). Moreover, teachers who gave their students the chance to engage in blog-based learning were readily able to track their individual students' learning progress and thus overall course performance (Wheeler & Lambert-Heggs, 2009). Here, blogs worked as indicator or alternative assessment tool and some studies reported that blogs are more appropriate in predicting the learning performance than traditional coursework (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008).

Therefore, it can be observed that from a pedagogical point of view, blogs enhance education by encouraging reflective practice in students: they help the students to take the leadership and engage responsibly in executing the learning activities. Xie et al. (2008) asserted that blogging has impact in increasing reflective learning in students. On the other hand, it can also be seen that blogs help the instructor to create an optimum setting that assists in monitoring the students in carrying out their learning responsibilities and evaluating the total quality of learning process.

Recognizing the invaluable previously discussed benefits of blogs, the education community involved in second language education has recently investigated the applicability, feasibility and impact of engaging blogs in pedagogical practice. Experience indicated that blogs have been useful in English learning and surpassed the traditional in-class discussions; they exposed students to authentic uses of the English language; worked as a tool for reflection for English language learners; and supplemented learners' skill development of reading, writing and comprehending (Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2010; Ismail & Mohd, 2012). Teacher bloggers emphasized that educational blogs influences the reading and writing skills in students – capabilities that are vital pillars in formulating literacy competency (Sparacio, 2006; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). This means that blogs, if utilized thoughtfully, have potential impact on developing student's literacy level. However, recent

studies (Beale, 2007; Rezaee & Oladi, 2008) have been narrowing their focus more to investigate the impact of blogs on improving the writing skills in second language learners.

By struggling with writing or lacking proper writing capabilities, students are unable to engage with text or go through authentic writing experience and so will lag behind (Noriah Ismail et al., 2012c). In the Malaysian context, universities demand students to exhibit mastery in English writing skill, among other skills, as a requirement for admission and to ensure students' capability in publishing their research work in international publications. Hence, educators are always keen to design and apply the most effective techniques that lead to improve the writing skills in their students. To meet this aspiration, some investigators (Sparacio, 2006; Zawilinski, 2009) suggested the use of blogs by benefiting from their prominent advantage of combining the publishing and discussion of student writing in a single medium (Warschauer, 2010). Experience from different world countries showed that blogging approach contributed constructively in enhancing English writing skills and driving positive writing attitudes in students (Gedera, 2011; Noriah et al., 2012c). This is because regular posting and editing of blog posts drive student bloggers to think about what it is they are to write about. When students are asked to address each other's arguments or express their ideas to other people or peers in blog on a regular basis, they will be encouraged to learn and develop the skills necessary to 1) articulate their ideas in writing, 2) defend their ideas against criticism, and 3) critically analyze the arguments of others. This act means implicitly that they will put much effort and emphasis on exploring the writing process and the language used (Sparacio, 2006).

Students will feel they have to build their stamina to polish and upgrade their current level of authorship proficiency and to support their textual and cognitive confidence; thus, bringing substantiated improvements in their writing skills. This dynamic interactivity makes them feel they learn to write for life-long learning purposes rather than mere engagement in topic of interest. Student bloggers interviewed in some research (e.g. Zawilinski, 2009) perceived many benefits of using blogs. These included encouraging independent learning and increased interest and motivation to use English because of interaction with, and feedback from, classmates and teachers. In another research (Warschauer, 2010), blogs were found helpful in "increasing the quantity of student writing as well as its lexical sophistication" and in training the students to "form a more colloquial to an academic writing style, develop a sense of voice, learn to participate in a community of writers, and gain an important new literacy". Further, because writing symbolizes the effect of connecting the students' work done inside the classroom walls with experiences the students have had outside the classroom environment, blogs offer the instructor an opportunity to evaluate the students' state of knowledge and thinking process about using English in relation to practical writing; thus adjust instruction as necessary (Warschauer, 2010).

3. The Research

The purpose of the current study is to survey the personal experiences of instructor bloggers about the use of blogs in second language education. In doing so, the study purposed to spot the light on the instructors' rationales behind using blogs in teaching English language, to analyze the different approaches of applying blogs in delivering their courses and to identify the different challenges encountering those instructor bloggers when working with the technology. The feedback and views of instructors and their personal experience are collected, assessed and analyzed; hoping the outcomes will give thoughtful insights about how certain blogs are useful in learning and teaching English to Malaysian students. This casts in formulating a better understanding on the current status of educational blog usage in Malaysia and on the instructors' perspectives of adopting blog technology in teaching English as a second language to Malaysian students. The outcomes this analysis may hopefully work as directive or general guidelines to Malaysian educators on the best practice of blog usage for optimum learning results and may enlighten the Malaysian academic professional about the role of blog technology in second language education.

3.1 Research Objectives

The main purpose of the study is to identify the instructors' rationale and perspectives in using blogs as a tool for teaching English as a Second Language. The research focuses on such aspects as the instructors' reasons and motivations for utilizing this technology in class as well as its practicality and whether the usage of blogs meets the teaching objectives.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study, depicted in Figure 1, illustrates the aspects that were studied in blogs in order to find the answers for the research questions mentioned above. Originally, the teaching with blog to be studied in this study would reflect three pedagogical principles that are derived from three major learning theories: behaviorist, cognitive and constructivist. The requirements sought after in blogs were as the following:

1) Student stimulation, derived from learning behavior theory.

2) Knowledge build up, derived from cognitive learning theory.

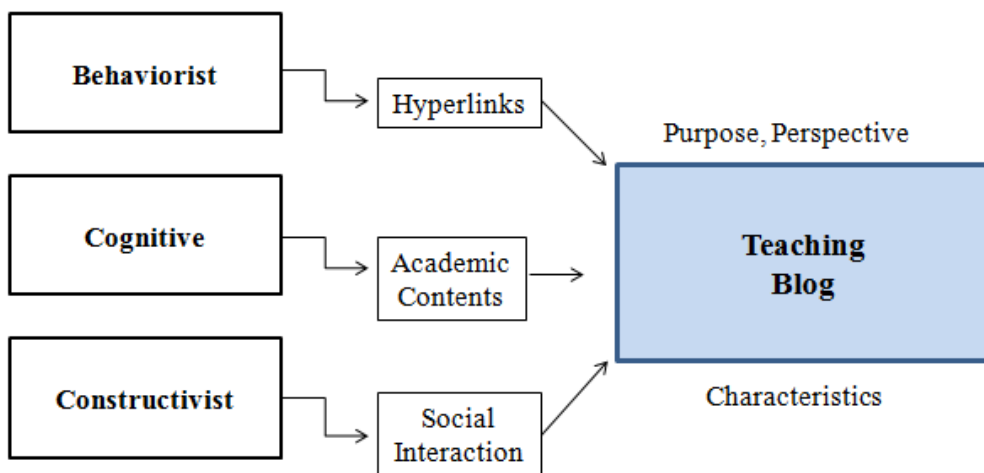3) Interactivity, derived from constructivism learning theory.

Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

These principles were perceived in this study as the vital requirements for a blog to be useful in language education; such that, meeting these requirements would indicate to the efficiency and effectiveness of the blog in education process. Therefore, blogs are assessed against these variables and reported for their impact and educational outcomes from teacher's perspective.

To accomplish the student stimulation requirement, language educational blog should be supplemented with hyperlinks (like navigation buttons) that are attractive enough to stimulate students to respond by clicking on the buttons. The buttons that may be hyperlinked to other pages and contents should be user-friendly and arranged in order. Other hyperlinks that are in the form of graphics, photos, video, and animations should be used to motivate students' interest to browse the content of the blog.

To meet the second requirement, learning materials including class notes, reading materials, relevant links to other websites, exploratory exercises for drill-and-practice mode, audio materials, and video materials should be provided in the blog. The learning materials should be adequate to address the content of the course. This will nourish students with relevant contents so that they could accommodate new information into their existing cognitive system as well as assimilate new information or knowledge and relate them with the old ones.

Finally, to meet the third requirement, blogs should be designed in a way that allows students to share ideas and learn from one another at their own pace. With that social interaction, students' relationship will be closer, and thus, it makes learning and interaction become meaningful. This is because students tend to learn better when they have a chance to interact with others and with peers and teachers in a conducive environment (Ismail, Hussin, & Darus, 2012b). Since the interaction in the classroom is limited by time and space, a virtual environment that extends the interaction opportunity for the students to engage in a continuous discussion would be very helpful.

3.3 Research Design

Basically, the research methodology adopted in the present study relied on a qualitative assessment approach to explore and develop knowledge on the instructor bloggers' perception on the usage of blog technology in English language education. To achieve this, English language instructor bloggers were surveyed by using interview sampling to elicit their personal impression and individual opinion about blog usage. Meanings were discovered from their personal experiences and expressed insights and then reported and interpreted qualitatively.

3.4 Sampling Subject and Size

A convenient sampling was adopted in this study. The sample selected for the study consisted of voluntary English language instructors who have been using blogs in their teaching practice during or prior the time of

carrying out this study in Malaysian universities. As this study is qualitative in nature, the sample size is small so that more in depth data could be elicited from the participants. The six participants in this study are Malaysian English language instructors, comprising 3 males (R 3, R 4 and R 5) and 3 females (R 1, R 2 and R 6). The interviewees were from two local public universities: one instructor was from University Teknologi MARA (UiTM) while the other five instructors were from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). These lecturers have been using blogs for teaching in their courses, such as English Literature, Applied Linguistics and other language related courses for more than fifteen years, and all of them have conducted at least one research on blogging and published a few studies in this field.

3.5 Instruments and Procedures

Input data required for analysis in this study were basically acquired with the aid of two types of sampling instrument:

1) A pre-designed interview to survey the instructor blogger's historical and personal experiences with blog technology in English language education.

2) A blog checklist to characterize the educational blogs already used in teaching the English language by the surveyed sample of instructors.

A face-to-face mode of interview was used to sample instructor's response against in-depth and semi-structure interview questions developed earlier by the researcher (see Appendix A) with the guide of the researcher's supervisor who has been active in conducting research on this area over the last 15 years. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) argued that semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are generally "organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee(s)" (p. 315). Prior to running the interview session, the participants were initially informed about the purpose of the study and ensured the confidentiality of their identities. The participants were identified by as: R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6 to keep their identities confidential. In addition, a Personal Data Form (PDF) was designed to collect basic demographic information about the participants and formulate a general idea about their backgrounds – interviewees' profile.

The second instrument is a checklist which was designed with the aid of similar works published in previous studies. The purpose is to support the knowledge extracted from interview instrument; hence, a checklist system was developed in the form of blog assessment rubrics matrix to diagnose those blogs used by the interviewees in their courses. The checklist purpose is to characterize the properties of instructors' blogs against other CMC (computer-mediated communication) platforms, e.g., emails, chat and e-forum, in terms of content and utilization. Permission to access password protected blogs was asked officially from the instructors to enable going through the blog and checking its contents. The diagnosis attempted to give insights on the following elements.

A. Features of class instruction or characteristic used in blog. The following items related to mode of class instruction were characterized in the blogs:

1)   Announcement,

2)   Course synopsis,

3)   Course schedule,

4)   Class assignments,

5)   Class notes,

6)   Class discussion or forum,

7)   Tutorials,

8)   Quiz,

9)   Reflective journal,

10)   Comments/responses by instructors,

11)   Comments/responses by students,

12)   Use of video materials e.g. YouTube,

13)   Use of audio e.g. lectures, speeches, songs, music,

14)   Use of pictures/photos,

15)   Use of graphics,

16)   Use of animations,

17)   Links to other blogs and websites, and

18)   Review of article.

B. Assessment in the blog: The following items related to mode of assessing class activities were characterized in the blogs:

1)   Class online discussion or online forum,

2)   Quiz,

3)   Reflective journal,

4)   Review of article, and

5)   Comments or responses by students.

By doing so, blog diagnosis would help to identify the main elements and characteristics that instructors used in blogs-based language teaching and in getting a clear picture about the most effective blog setting that ensures best educational outcomes. This exercise not only played as a support to knowledge synthesized from the interview data, but also acted as a tool for data validation and verification; thus, strengthening the qualitative analysis. Since the data extracted from interviews depended solely on the individual, personal impression of instructors on blogging and could not be generalized to all cases in real life – a common issue encountered in qualitative research in general (Nelson, 1999) - checklist data would allow to testify and validate the reliability and trustfulness of interview information and its degree of matching with reality. Tong et al. (2007) discussed that checklist methods "promote complete and transparent reporting among researchers and indirectly improve the rigor, comprehensiveness and credibility of interview and focus-group studies". In addition, Merriam (1998) asserted that:

"Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews. Most agree that when reality is viewed in this manner, internal validity is a definite strength of qualitative research".

3.6 Data Management

Interviewees' responses were tape-recorded and written in transcripts for preservation and analysis. Multiple copies in digital and analogue formats of the sample responses on interviews and checklists were reproduced as a precaution procedure against loss or damage. Transcript data were managed in files called D-R1, D-R2, D-R3, D-R4, D-R5 and D-R6 representing feedback from the six participants in the interview. The digital data collected from interview forms, blog observations, email attachments and blog documents were printed out in a hard copy format in preparation for analysis. Coding the data for each interviewed participant was applied, and based on the codes, thematic codes were drawn. The data of all participants were subject to scrutinizing and organization processes in order to find out commonalties and derive codes from such data. This exercise allowed for simple classification and categorization of interviews and blog observation data; thus strengthening the qualitative analysis. According to Schatzman and Strauss (1973 cited in Creswell, 2009), "qualitative data analysis primarily entails classifying things, persons, and events and the properties which characterize them".

3.7 Data Analysis

An analytical (descriptive) report was prepared for summarizing, visualizing and evaluating the findings of data processing. Graphical representation of the results was used with the aid of SPSS software to facilitate the processes of describing the meaning and significance of interviews and checklist data as well as information inference. The information derived from interviews and blog assessment rubrics were gathered, organized, managed, coded, and analyzed in order to seek answers to the pre-set research questions. An inductive approach of analysis was carried out on interview data to present a more accurate and contemporary picture of the current issue. Inductive analysis allows the researcher to explain, interpret and render meaning from the interviews (Neuman, 2006). In doing so, responses and feedback of interviewees were assessed to discover the meaning laden in individual blogging experiences and then interpreting these meanings scientifically in a linguistic education context. Supporting quotations from the participants were provided in the report to support the evaluation process. This exercise would add transparency and trustworthiness to data interpretation and validates the generated findings (Tong et al., 2007). To test honesty and accuracy of individual responses to interview

questions, consistency checks were made on the interview transcripts – a procedure recommended by Creswell (2009) in qualitative research.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings on the instructors' reflection on using blogs in teaching of English language. Three types of instructors were categorized as sensed from interview analysis:

1) Instructors owning their personal blogs

2) Instructors asking the learners to create their blogs

3) Instructors asking their learners to use other peoples' blogs

4.1 Instructors Owning Their Personal Blogs

Figure 2 shows that around 67% (4 out of 6) of the interviewed instructors owned their personal weblog and that 33% (2 out of 6) of the interviewed instructors did not have their personal weblog. The rationales driving the sampled instructors behind owning a personal blog were varied and in accordance to the teacher's personal, professional and educational purposes. In this respect, the following instructor's motives behind creating a personal blog were reported and discussed:

1) Entertainment purposes: The instructor created a weblog in the first instance to enjoy a fun time with surfing or trying the technology; it did not work for educational nor reflection purposes. One interviewed female instructor (R2) reported that, at the beginning, she wanted to learn how to use a blog, and then she created one just for fun. In this case, the instructor motives behind opening a blog was to explore and acquire awareness on how blogging works in real life. It was noted that blogs serving this purpose were abandoned after a passing time as the instructor lost the desire or went in a shortage of time to maintain and update the blog. This was evident from the response of R2 participant when she was asked whether her blog was still alive and updated. She responded: "I am not sure whether it is still active or not. I have stopped updating it. I did not update it recently."
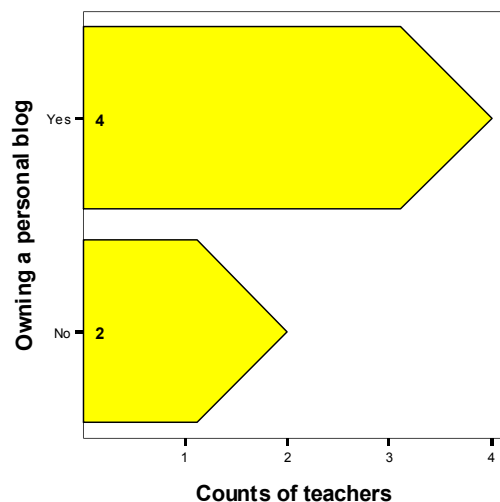

Figure 2. Graph showing the number of teachers owning a personal blog

2) Reflection purposes: The instructor built a weblog in the first instance to support his or her reflective behavior and expressing oneself and sharing personal experience with other people. The desire for reflection practice in using blogs was evident in the response of (R3) participant who reported,

"My personal blog is only where I stated in my blog is actually for me to read when I get older, to see my thoughts later on and what was the things happened in my life and how I did think and my thoughts during that time. I posted certain important things just when I really wanted to express something so maybe later, after many years I will read it and think about it."

It can be seen that the blog was considered as a platform for formulating, upgrading or re-shaping the personal views and existing knowledge into advanced level on the track to improve the individual skills and develop one's way of thinking/perception. Through blogging, the blogger was motivated to express oneself openly and get the

interest of other people to share them his personal views and experience. He considered the blog as a diary in which his feelings are documented, revealed and shared. This was evident in his response,

"When I was first introduced to blogs I have read a lot of other peoples' blogs, there are so many different blogs, so many written by everybody they express their thoughts; it is like a diary so that motivated me to write my own blog also just to express myself. Because actually I feel I am not very talkative person, I do not share a lot and do not give opinion so that is how I share things. And I think also what motivated me blogs they are written for certain things so when you read them you get interested and then get motivated to write on a blog."

Ultimately, the practice of blogging benefits this instructor blogger in many ways, such as better understanding of oneself (emotions, thinking, weakness and strength points, etc.), re-organizing thoughts and learning new experiences from old ones to use the generated knowledge in manipulating future challenges. Instructors of this type usually keep their blogs maintained and updated since they attended to their blogs on regular basis by posting, checking on their posts and responding to the received comments The participant R3 reported that he had been updating his blog once a week.

3)   Teaching purposes: The instructor built a weblog in the first instance for educational purposes, which are varied from one instructor to another. Their objectives include:

Sharing of information on language teaching and related technology applications. This was evident in the statement of the R5 participant,

"..to share information on my academic activities and latest development in language education and technology, for those who are interested in integrating technology into teaching."

Announcement about academic activities through uploading news and recent events taking place in the class/school. The instructor tends to assign a link to each activity/news to allow others reading the updates. This type of instructor blogger updates their blog only when they are alerted with new activity/information and latest news. This was evident in the statement of R6 participant,

"My blog will be more about my teaching activities more of professional so if I want to show something in my blog is simply what I am as a teacher, what I am as for example with my supervisees so I only inform those things just for a teaching platform."

Accessibility to Malaysian student community. According to the responses of the interviewees, blogs became popular among Malaysian university students because students found blog a friendly platform and comforting to them compared to other university-developed forum environments. Therefore, teachers can access their students beyond the university environment. In this respect, R4 participant claimed that,

"Actually, I find that students are using the blog more than the SPIN (a university Learning Management System). It is more accessible and I do not know somehow the students find it is more informal they find it more friendly than SPIN so that motivated me to use blogs and it also allows me and my students to go beyond the teaching sometimes there are something not related to teaching but I am interested in."

Practicality in managing the teaching tasks. Instructors felt easier and faster to deal with blog than with university forums in managing the learning process and materials. The interviewees experienced the positivity of blogs in managing the course materials, class assignments, communication with students and managing the discussions. The response of R5 participant explained these aspects,

"Blog has become a good teaching tool for me. It is very helpful and very practical. First, it helps me to provide necessary information about class assignments and reading tasks, and class notes, the information is there in the blog all the time. If they (students) don't understand, they can write or ask in the comment box, and when I answer their questions, my responses can be read by every student who has access to the blog.... Secondly, when I am away, I can still manage my teaching and communication with my students from a distance. Thirdly, I can exploit the forum well in the blog. Now I feel like blog is a must in any other course that I would teach."

4)   Professional networking. Some interviewed instructors were reported to open their blogs for the purpose of marketing themselves. R5 participant, for example asserted the objective of opening educational blog was to market his expertise in technology-based language education through networking with other professionals from different countries. The participant stated that,

"..by having blogs I believe I will always learn new things from other people as I have to do some reading about technology; I will always have an opportunity to share what I have and what I know about my field."

This type of instructor bloggers considered blogging as a platform for exposure to updated knowledge on language and related technology application. The instructor used the blog to keep in touch with the recent

development in language education and to communicate with other professionals in the world of the same specialty of the participant. Such type of blogging instructors maintain and update their blogs on regular basis. R5 participant asserted that he kept updating his blog 1-2 times a month.

4.2 Instructors Asking their Students to Create Their Blogs

Figure 3 shows that approximately 83% (5 out of 6) of the interviewed instructors asked their students to open a weblog during their teaching history. However, only 17% (1 out of 6) of the interviewed instructors did not ask their students to construct a weblog of their own during their teaching history. The interviewed instructors pointed out to the preferential use of BlogSpot (Blogger) and WordPress as a platform for creating student individual or group blogs. Teachers who required their students to create their own blogs reported different reasons behind this requirement:

1)   Course requirement: Creating a blog was a necessary requirement to pass the subject and as a part of the assessment process. Students were obliged to construct a personal blog as a material of studying and evaluation. Without blogs, students couldn't access the information of the subject nor achieving rewards (remarks). Instructors monitor the performance of their students and assess their work by asking the students to submit the URL of their blogs. In this respect, R6 participant stated: "…they (students) need to have their blog. Because they can use my information in my blog and they should post me the URL."
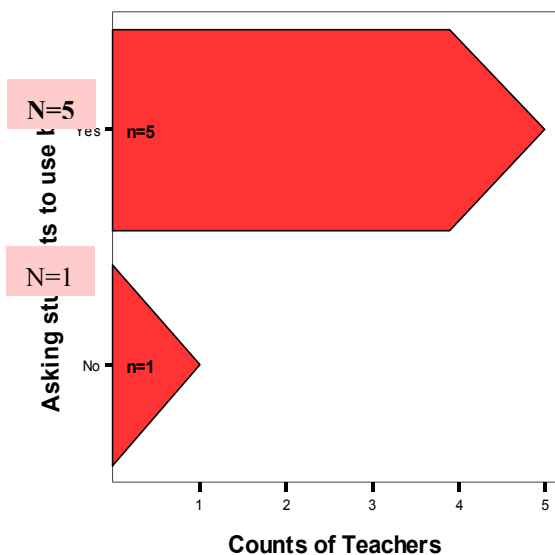

Figure 3. Graph showing the number of teachers asking their students to create their own blog

2)   Executing course assignments: Blogs were created by students to do the project work and class activities assigned by the language teacher. R3 participant stated that "every student created his individual blog because this is where they do their assignments on the blogs." The students were asked to read, evaluate and discuss collaboratively some English articles published in the Internet and transferred to their blogs, and exchange opinions about the discussed topics. The work of each student was published on the blog; thus, every student in the class, including the teacher, was able to present his/her own work as well as read and give comments on other student's work. In this way, the interviewed instructor believed that students would practice better the English language and learn faster. R2 participant expressed that "The project work needs them to read articles and do discussions and to give their opinion in the blogs. At the end of the project, they need to present it to the classroom for English purposes."

The interviewed instructors reported that students were enjoying the advantages of blog in presenting their work due to the flexibility and multiple capabilities of blog in managing the presentation and including graphics and media that may enhance the impression of the presentation. The media materials used by students in their presentations also benefited the instructor as an educational resource for teaching future students. In this respect, R4 participant stated that,

"The students are very keen to use blogs to do their presentations because a blog is easy to manage and easy to incorporate like animations, incorporate graphics and other multimedia features and it is easier than using other application.... they do a lot of internet search and they find many interesting things sometimes they find MP3 clips and also they find YouTube and bring all that in and later on when I teach the same course I found that these materials become useful resources for future students."

Other interviewed instructors were asking students to use the blog to comment on the exercises and give their feedback on the lecture of the day. This exercise allowed the teacher to know the students' reflection about the learning process and know their knowledge status after each class. R3 participant explained his experience with a set of interactive exercises that were designed using Hot Potatoes tool. The exercises were then uploaded into the blogs. R3 claimed that,

"Sometimes after each lecture, I asked them to reflect about what I have taught for example about hot potato I asked them what are their comments about the exercises and if they had known how to use hot potato and using Microsoft excel to making exercises before they went to teaching practicum so they do comments and ask and get feedback and I let them comment in what they have learnt in the class and what they think."

Blogs were also used as a space for assignment-related communication between students and the instructor and among students. Students directed their questions about the assignment to their instructors through the blog to obtain further clarifications that may assist them in solving their project. R3 participant emphasized that "...they (students) ask questions mostly through my blog when they need some clarifications; if they do not understand any assignment or if they have problems or they want to ask about a certain software."

Interviewed instructors exhibited different reflections towards the students' need for computer skills to design and create their own blog. In this avenue, the interviewed instructors can be categorized into the following types:

1)   Instructors who were neither aware of students' computer competency nor interested in training them on creating a blog. This was represented by R1 participant who did not consider blogging a course requirement.

2)   Instructors who already found their students ICT competent and capable in designing and creating their own blogs without any previous training or involvement from their teacher. The instructor's role was only supervisory in the process. R3 and R4 participants represented this type of instructors. For example, the role of R4 participant was giving guidance on specific blog designing issues that utter his students. He stated that,

"..there are certain things that students need to work on the blogs, certain things that I would like to discuss with them like how can make a blog more user friendly and the kinds of form to use, the color concept and the graphics that can be included and so on".

In a different way, R3 teacher relied on the concept of 'learning through examples': he advised his students to visit some already established blogs on the Internet and follow the steps in there leading to create a blog. Through trying example blogs, students were learning and gaining the desired skills for designing their own blogs, and gradually they were able to establish, maintain and update their own ones. He stated that,

"I just told them to go to the blogger website and read it so they will understand how to do it easily, because most of my students are quite computer's heavy, they know they are computer literate, not that heavy but they know and they have their friends to help. I just told them go to this blog and put their emails and follow the instructions so within two hours they could do it and have create their blogs".

3)   Instructors who initially felt their students need some basic training on how to design and create blog to meet the course standards. The teacher trained the students on designing a blog as a priority towards learning the course, and then later students learnt on themselves how to do it. This type of instructors was represented by R2, R5 and R6 participants who considered blogging a course requirement in the teaching methodology, so they cared to train their students step by step in class or in multimedia lab, and monitor their performance in designing a blog through asking the URL of their blogs, giving teacher's comments and feedback or sharing blogs with peers and classmates for comparison. This would ultimately enhance the creativity skills of the students and improve the student's blog in a way that serves the learning/course objectives. In this respect, R5 participant asserted that,

"I have to ensure they acquire some knowledge and skills before they could come out with good design for the learning blog.... I would check their blog and provide feedbacks on their blog. I would also give them suggestions how to improve their blog. Next I would also require my students to share their blogs with their peers in class so that they could compare their blogs with other blogs."

4.3 Instructors Asking Their Students to Use Other Peoples' Blogs

In general, most of the interviewed instructors referred often to use links and URLs of other people blogs during their teaching. This attitude was taken to support teacher's efforts of explaining the blog phenomenon to students, training students on blog designing, enriching the course with additional information resources, supporting the discussions in blogs, infusing students to read and write articles or to research on specific anthropological aspects of the Internet community via blog observation. For example, one interviewed instructor (i.e., R1 participant) didn't ask her students to create their own blogs because it wasn't a course requirement. Instead, she asked them to visit and explore other peoples' blogs to learn how people in Malaysia construct their identities and write about themselves as males or females in the cyberspace. Because of the nature of the research, the instructor didn't find a point in asking each student to create his own blog as the subject of research was focusing more on exploring the attitude of the open community of Malaysian Internet users in general. The instructor expressed that "in cyberspace we call identity is fluid, i.e. it can be ambivalent. Therefore, I asked my students to study 3 blogs to see how the blogger construct her or his identity online." The instructor found out that by giving her students a host of links to other peoples' blogs as subjects of case studies and analysis, students were readily able to examine and sense how people construct their genders online, and concluded that the person's identity whether male or female is generally fluid in the digital space.

4.4 Instructors' Reflection on Educational Blogs

The interviewed instructors experienced varied situations where learning outcomes and course objectives were achieved by developing and employing educational blogs in the teaching methodology. In general, the participants had a positive reflection about educational blogs, and emphasized that integration of blogs in teaching contributed successfully to the development of learning. From analyzing the interview responses of the sampled instructors, the positive aspects of embedding blogs in class were reported to benefit each member of the learning process – the teacher and the student. In the participants' point of view, the following positives of educational blogs to the student were reported:

1) Enhancing students' skills of English writing: Interviewed instructors observed that when students were asked to read and write articles or participate in discussions or commenting on posts in blogs, they were automatically improving their level of English. Students were reported to acquire new vocabulary, learn from previous mistakes, familiarize themselves with the formal language, and correct their mistakes autonomously and phrasing of proper sentences to make others understand them better. One participant (R2) observed in her students, a gradual improvement in their writing capability after they got used to blogging; "they managed to increase their level of proficiency, their level of vocabulary when writing, and their writing became longer than before; they managed to write two paragraphs instead of two sentences."In the process of writing, students were reading other students' works, and therefore, learning from each other. This was evident in the observation of R6 participant who reported that,

"...some of students who visited their friends' blogs, they pick up some new words so their vocabulary will increase, but in speaking I did not realized they are improved, so out of the skills may be in writing skills. I tent to see that blogs do enhance or improve their writing skills in terms of vocabulary."

The impression of R3 interviewee implied to a similar observation,

"I have found that they (students) made less grammar mistakes because they were more aware, they knew that everybody is reading so they were conscious about the quality of their writing. And then when they read others; those students who are better, they get very impressed so they want to be at the same level."

2) Enhancing the student's understanding of the course. Interviewed instructors noticed that when students attend to their project work or assignments, they were referring to different information resources to support their works and statements, and share their work with classmates for comparison. This attitude of knowledge acquisition and sharing helped students in gaining a better understanding of the course content. This was reported by R5 participant who did not consider writing proper English on blogs an important factor in evaluating the performance of the learning process. Instead, he was giving more weight to the blog content, believing that the important aspect in blogging is driving students to gain the knowledge laden in the information they encounter rather than the language conveying the information. He specifically stated that,

"The main purpose of the forum is to extend the learning process outside classroom so that there is a continuous enrichment in their acquisition of knowledge in the course. The forum will lead them to understand the course content better and, therefore the learning objectives in the course can be met."

3) Improving students' digital literacy. Interviewed instructors observed that adopting blogs in teaching their courses reflected positively in approaching the student to technology. By allowing students to interact with their teachers, peers, classmates, and information through blogs (i.e., online activities of submitting assignments, participation in discussions, etc.), students gradually learn how to constructively apply the technology and appreciate its value and use in their life; thus improving their ICT skills. This was reported in practice by R3 participant who observed that,

"..when students use it (blog), it is actually an application it is not a theory it is actually hands on experience and they see immediately how to use technology in the classroom. If I just give them a theory and do not use any technology and submit everything in a piece of paper, so it is just a theory nothing integration but when they use technology, they apply immediately because everything is using technology. So it is immediate application, they can see the relationship and they can see how useful technology is."

R4 participant emphasized that students being satisfied and enjoying the technology were excited and decided to continue using the technology; they asked their teacher to send his future assignments online. This implies that when technology is appreciated, students will care to work with it and enjoy their work online.

In addition to the previously mentioned benefits to students, participants reported the following advantages of educational blogs to the teacher:

4) Supporting class teaching methodologies. Interviewed instructors asserted that integrating blogs in their face-to-face teaching techniques helped them in their teaching efforts from the following points:

Strengthening the course with information materials from the web that helped the teacher in the course demonstration and explanation to students and in enriching the teacher's as well as students' knowledge about the topic;

Infusing the excitement and interactivity environment in the learning/teaching process; and

Allowing students to access extra-information materials (online) related to the course from non-traditional sources (textbooks or libraries).

Meeting the course objectives. All interviewed instructors expressed their satisfaction and confidence in educational blogs in achieving the desired learning objectives of their courses because of its practicality and usefulness. Expressions extracted from the interview responses like the followings all implied to the practicality and feasibility of blogs as a reliable tool for online education:

"..they managed to write, they manage to learn" – (R2 participant);

"..I found that their (students) responses to my questions confirmed that the learning objectives are met" – (R5 participant);

"... I would say positive because it met the learning outcomes" – (R6 participant);

"I think using blog is very practical…It always works, I think because it is clear cut, very direct instruction"– (R3 participant); and

"If you put it in scales from 1 to 5, being 1 for less effective and 5 for most effective, I would easily go for 5, so it (blog) is useful" – (R4 participant).

Spreading awareness on the technology in the education world. When teachers of today take the initiative in accommodating their pedagogical techniques to online technology, future teachers will be encouraged to follow on the same track and consider digital technology part of their professional competency. Essentially, students will also learn from these digitally literate teachers by considering them a successful model to imitate; thus leading them to embark upon the assimilation of technology as part of their learning style. This was sensed in the response of one interviewed instructor (R3 participant) who stated that,

"...when you (teacher) teach something, you have to preach what you teach; so it is showing an example, giving them (students) a first-hand example on how to use technology in the classroom."

In their responses, interviewed instructors of R3, R4 and R6 participants asserted the following aspects of practicability in educational blogs:

Instant delivery and distribution of assignments with the ability to identify late student submissions by tracking the publishing date.

Accessibility to students beyond class environment without face-to-face contact.

Notifications reach on real-time

Preservation of all class activities and teacher's news/announcements/instructions on the blog (i.e., log record) so everyone can refer to information anytime anywhere.

Opportunity to monitor students and assess their performance from distance, sometimes leading to identify those students of potential.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be stated that the status of using blogs in Malaysian universities for second language education is still in initial stage. The surveyed instructors in this study who experienced blogs in language pedagogy perceived blogs as reliable and effective tool for developing the learning and teaching of English language to Malaysian students. The endeavors of integrating blogs in language teaching received positive reflection from the surveyed teachers: they found blog-based education systems feasible, practical, and serving both the teacher and the student in achieving the desired objectives.

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