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DEVELOPING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING ON THE USAGE OF BLOG IN LINGUISTICS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

The basic aim of this article is to analyze the notion of students' blog use in a Linguistics course that is extremely important in an English Language Teaching program at universities. A lot of students participated in this course. The students were asked to answer to different blog questions on the linguistics lectures over the course of a term. They were also involved to share their answers and opinions with one another. The lectures related topics such as language acquisition, bilingualism and sociolinguistics. In the end of the term, the researcher regulated several tasks consisting of several questions about the usage of the blog and its contribution to their learning. The results of the study showed that the usage of the blog helped the students with their self-learning process and learning others' ideas, notions, helped them express themselves better than in class as well as understand the linguistic topics better.

KEYWORDS: *Blog; Evaluation, Linguistics, Teaching And Learning, Self-Learning Process, Technologies, Cooperative Learning, Linguistic Course*

I. INTRODUCTION

At present, the usage of Web 2.0 technologies, such as wiki, blog, podcast, instant messenger, online social communities (eg., Facebook), online video sharing (eg., YouTube), and online video and audio conferencing tools and their effect on teaching and learning have become one of the most investigated topics. This work checks the effective sides of using blogs on the learning of a different of topics in a college level Linguistics course. Blogs are defined as "personal or organizational web pages organized by dated entries, with newer items posted to the top of the site, usually consisting of links, media, ideas, perceptions, commentaries, personal thoughts, essays, papers and ongoing discussions" (Blood 2003, p.12). The efficiency of utilizing blogs for

educational aims has been investigated and usedby many researchers from various perspectives (Armstrong et al., 2004; Boling, et al., 2008; Chan & Ridgway, 2003; Downes, 2004; Edbauer et al., 2005; Glass & Spiegelman, 2008; Glogoff, 2005; Haramiak, Boulton, & Irwin, 2009; Kajder& Bull, 2004; Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Quible, 2005; Ray, 2006; Wassell&Crouch, 2008). The studies presented that instructors who used blogs in their courses could support students with different kinds of activities that engaged students in discussions and give feedback to students regarding their comments. Through the usage of blogs, instructors also helped students expand their knowledge of a variety of topics, inspired them to focus deeply on the information that they acquired and write on their peers' blogs.

In addition, the studies also found that blogs enhanced literacy and motivated social and peer interaction. What makes blogs different from traditional classrooms is that blog users have more chances to present on each other's opinions and engage in discussions. One of the reasons that this study was conducted was to determine whether blogging would have a positive effect on the students' participation in discussions. Students in the present study, due to their low English proficiency levels, usually feel embarrassed or intimidated when they have to speak up in the classroom and this prevents them from expressing themselves. In addition, the fact that Linguistics involves many unfamiliar terms and concepts adds a new difficulty. It was hoped that blogging would motivate students to express themselves more frequently about the problems raised in class. In addition, a significant factor related to students' participation in the blog has to do with time. Since the students in the present study are not very fluent English speakers, they cannot express themselves in the classroom discussions and share their opinions with their classmates in a very short time. However, blogging can give students the opportunity to take sufficient time to reflect on others' opinions as much as they need to and also respond to them. Further, blogging is also perceived as an activity that can play an important role in improving writing. Through expressing themselves by the use of blogs, students can improve their writing skills. Some courses do not demand students to do much writing in the classroom and therefore, blogging can be an effective tool for students to express their views and thoughts in writing.

The main aim of the authors is to check the hypothesis that using a course blog develops and improves the quality of learning. It is expected that students will communicate with each other to discuss certain topics raised in class. The following section presents a brief review of the literature followed by the methodology used for the present study. Then the data analysis and results are reported and finally a general discussion is provided.

Cooperative learning (Slavin, 1996) suggests that motivation is maintained by social ties formed in collaborative or individual works, but shared works and blogs are also ideal for publishing material for critical feedback and seeing examples of others' work. Blogs offer a chance for students to reflect, rewrite, comment and perfect their work which do not exist or take too much time in class. Further, the chance to learn individually via blogs gives students an online personality where they can criticize others' work and communicate with other online communities for the advancement of their writing skills. Most tacit knowledge is gained through participation in such communities and emancipation of learners in this kind of media forms the basis of learning. Moreover, blogs do not restrict curricula.When the process of blogging is considered, most of the content of the blogs are prepared by students and thus it is the learner's choice to seek and find what to learn either through reading or writing. However, in order for

blogs to be effective like any other self/collaborative learning environment, they must be built with guidance and structure, otherwise they will be nothing more than archives. For example, excessive time spent on blogging activities caused lack of motivation among language learners to use and challenge in blogging activities. Thus, it is really significant that instructors train learners regarding writing critical feedback and give information them that blogs are more about substantiality, fluency and expression rather than accuracy.

The advantages of blogs on the teaching and learning process was examined from different perspectives. In Fessakis et al. (2008), when learners were asked to form an artefact together by using a blog, they stated that the online zone gave them chances that they could not otherwise utilize in class environment in such depth. The authors also focused the significance of communication and controling but saw the absence of a notification system in blog as a bad side since some posted questions were left unanswered. The authors thought a study with higher number of participants and developed time for analyzing the usage of blogs because they thought that it would increase participation, especially if there is a larger body of material and different ideas. In another study, Park et al. (2011) found that blogging can be used to gather knowledge and information, express opinions, views and become more active in certain areas of interest. In the study, learners perceived blogging mostly as an acquisition and reflection oriented process. The majority of them also thought that blogging changed their personal ways of thinking and social relationships and helped them increase themselves. Further, they also gave information that blogs helped them deal with information differently. In Fessakis et al. (2008) participants reported that they could spend less time on tasks, monitor the work of others and directly communicate with one another by the help of blogs. They also expressed satisfactory learning outcomes, feelings of collaboration, and responsibility. Avcı and Aşkar (2011) compared factors that affect blogs and wikis as constructive tools in computer courses. The results presented that perceived useless was the highest determinant factor in using blogs in the teaching-learning process. In addition, blogs made it easier to access and reflect on information, inspired peer and social interaction and ensured feedback and equal access to information. Similar results were obtained from Yang (2009).

II. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of the learners about the usage of the blog, more specifically, whether blogs would help them comprehend content better and as well as express themselves better than they do in class sessions. Participants were 2nd year students enrolled in three sections of a Linguistics course. Linguistics course is a required course which is taught over two semesters. The curriculum emphasized on core areas such as syntax, semantics, and phonetics in the Fall term and first and second language acquisition, bilingualism and sociolinguistics in the second term. The study was conducted over the Spring term. All three sections were taught by the same instructor. The sections met once a week for three hours. There were approximately 50 students in each section and students were predominantly female. Students were between the ages of 18 and 20. Convenience sampling was used in the study. Seventy-one second-year students (52 females, 16 males, 3 students did not report their gender) volunteered to participate in the study.

First, the researchers created a blog for use as a discussion forum for students. Then during the semester, they asked the students to answer to several blog questions about the linguistics

lectures. The lectures used topics such as language acquisition, bilingualism and sociolinguistics. The course was conducted over a 10-week period. Students were required to focus upon the issues each week and post their views on the questions; as well as post comments on their friends' answers. They were also motivated to debate their responses with each other. Students were given a choice on whether to be anonymous or identified when blogging. In addition, the participation in the study was voluntary. The effect for this is that students using blogs as part of the fulfillment of their courses did not necessarily present enthusiasm in personalizing or maintaining their blogs (Williams & Jacobs 2004). In addition, according to Instone (2005), Kuzu (2007), and Salen (2007), students saw blogging as a waste of time activity and they used it because it was required to pass the course.

At the end of the term, the researchers administered a questionnaire including of 16 statements about the usage of the blog and its contribution to students' learning. The questionnaire was adapted from Yoo and Huang (2011) and used a 5-point Likert scale in terms of 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). While the questionnaire items used themes such as collaborative learning, self-directed learning, online identity, writing skills and treatment to technology usage, the main aim was to investigate the benefits of using the blog in learning. It was expected that the students would write more critically and carefully since the blog was public and they would be evaluated by their friends and others as compared to writing in the classroom. Since the study is limited to the students taking the Linguistics course, it is a case study in a quantitative paradigm.

III. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Several researchers compared formal learning in classrooms and informal learning through the use of blogs to determine the effectiveness of blogging. Heo et al. (2012) investigated the effects of blogging on informal learning. According to the authors, blogs have the potential for informal learning because of the flexibility that allow people to learn with encouragement from their instructors. The authors defined learning in three dimensions (see figure below) which also apply to learning with blogs. For example, through the use of blogs learners can make self-reflection and meaning-making through writing and reading one anothers' comments. In addition, there is social interaction that does not often happen in a traditional class.
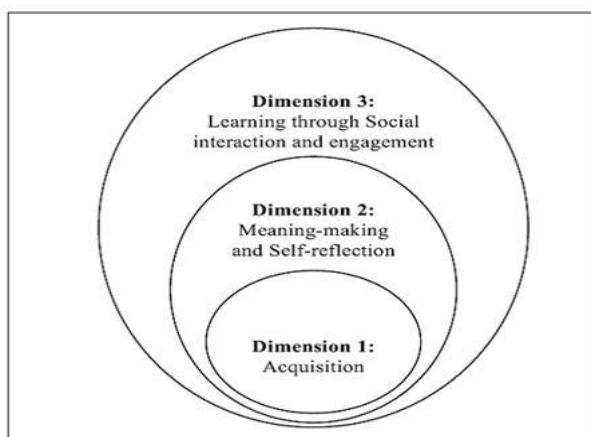

Figure taken from Heo et al. (2013, p.142)

Novakovic et al. (2013) conducted a study to determine the differences between traditional writing methods and using social media in terms of learning benefits. The authors found that feedback played a crucial role on developed engagement and time spent on tasks. In another study, Park et al. (2011) analyzed the differences between informal learning with blogs and formal learning in school. As it can be seen from the table below, learning through blogs cannot be limited or restricted. While it may not be useful to give learners such freedom, learning in schools can be formed to have more independence or interdependence on other learners. The authors think that it is best to keep a concrete degree of freedom through projects while offering proper topics for homework and such. At least some parts of the lessons should be voluntarily based or there should be more choices for assessment. The idea of self-regulation and self-determination in learning should be the ultimate goal of education so that learners can make their own decisions and become autonomous in their learning, which can take the boredom out of learning.

Table 6. Difference of characteristics between informal learning through blogging and formal education at schools

Themes	Learning through blogging	Learning in school
Learner's role	Self-directed Self-meaning making Self-motivated Active Voluntary	Passive Non voluntary
Characteristics of learning contents	Practical and tacit knowledge Social and everyday life Situated Subjective Unlimited Multiple directions	Theoretical knowledge Structured and organized Curriculum-based Disciplinary Non-practical Fixed
Learning process	Self-regulated Open Flexible Process-oriented	Guided Structured and organized Fixed Outcome-oriented

Figure taken from Park et al (2011, p.158)

Researchers also paid attention tothe role of anonymity in the usage of blogs and found that students present themselves better when they are anonymous. In a study conducted by Lu and Bol (2007), the effect of identifiable and anonymous comments given by 92 undergraduate students in general English writing classes in college are compared in an e-mode. Students were randomly classified into identifiable and anonymous groups and met for regular classes in separate way. The results showed that the students in the anonymity group was better than the identifiable group with respect to their writing and giving more critical peer feedback. In addition, anonymity in a writing course increased student participation (Miyazoe et al., 2011) as well as made it possible for students to make critical reflections with the guidance of teachers (Yang, 2009). However, instructors and students have to get more information about the fact that anonymity may lead to irresponsibility (Miyazoe1 & Anderson, 2011).

IV.DISCUSSION

This paper is intended to give basic information on the learning advantages of utilizing blogs in a Linguistics course. Although the study is conducted in the context of a special course with

students only, the findings, nevertheless, let us to support different tentative insights of students' notions of the learning incomes of blogging. In examining the useful sides of blogging, the most of participants gave the main information and positive opinions about their own experiences as bloggers, and reported that using a blog made it easier for them to learn about the Linguistics subjects, enhance their internet skills, finish their assignments quickly, and learn on their own. They also considered that blogging developed their motivation to learn about the Linguistics subjects. It is crucial to acknowledge that students of today are equipped with the essential skills to search for and exchange information on various platforms and already have motivation to do so. That is why, the result that students showed positive thoughts to utilizing the blog is expected. It can also be said that 'time' may have played a great importance on the good ideas and suggestions of the students to using the blog. Since the students in the present study are not very good, experienced English speakers, they cannot show themselves in the classroom discussions and share their opinions with their classmates in a very short time. However, blogging can give students the chance to take enough time to reflect on others' thoughts as much as they have to and also answer to them.

More significantly, 45 % of the participants agreed with the fact that they showed themselves better when blogging than they presented themselves in the classroom. As given in section 1, participants in the present study feel very anxious when they have to participate in the discussions that take place in the classroom. Most of the time they do not speak up for fear of being embarrassed due to their limited English language proficiency and their unfamiliarity with the Linguistic terms. For this reason, students agreed with the fact that blogging was an activity for them to express their thoughts and opinions freely without any fear or embarrassment. In addition, as mentioned in section 1, blogging is also perceived as an activity that can play an important role in improving writing. Through expressing themselves by the use of blogs, students can enhance their writing skills. The Linguistics course does not require students to do much writing in the classroom and therefore, blogging can be a useful device for students to give their view points and understandings in writing. In addition, the quality of students' entries gets better as they utilize blogs. According to Fernheimer and Nelson (2005) when students use blogs, they make their blogs their own and thus are more likely to write entries that are good opinion and idea.

The findings of this study shows that using blogs as part of a course assisted students learn the subject-matter more efficiently and played an important role in encouraging students to learn from one another as well as from other resources. In addition, the students acknowledged that blogging changed their learning process in a positive way. Therefore, it is important that instructors understand the potential effects of blogging and efficiently integrate it in their own courses. Glogoff (2005) suggests a number of ways in which blogging can be used in classrooms. Blogging, for instance, can be used in a knowledge-centered instructional environment where the instructor involves students in research activities and engages them in discussions to help them learn the necessary knowledge that the subject-matter requires. Learner-centered blogging is another efficient way which emphasizes the importance of giving positive feedback to students and making comments about their work. Moreover, blogging can be used as a receptive learning tool through which students can acquire, reflect and assess information. They can also be used as a directive learning tool by which students can have equal access to

information, and other additional materials which can widen their knowledge about a certain subject.

Finally, blogs can be helpful devices to motivate guided discovery and knowledge construction. For example, after students do research about a given subject, they can connect with other students to form knowledge and prepare a common report together. Given the fact that there can be different methods concerning the ways blogs can be used in the classrooms, students' learning styles should also be taken into consideration (Lin, et al., 2013). Given the fact that students of today are highly dependent on the Internet and getting sophisticated each day at searching for and exchanging information, educators should acknowledge the good sides of blogging in learning and inspiring students to utilize blogs in their classrooms to increase learning.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the findings of the study reveal that using a course blog can have a positive effect on the learning outcomes and suggest that instructors incorporate blogs into their classes to give opportunities for students to learn the subject matter. When the appropriate pedagogical approach is used, blogs can enhance the quality of learning. The results indicated that students' notion of blogging is consistent with those discussed in existing literature (Novakovich and Long, 2013; Avcı and Askar 2012; Park, MiHeo and Lee 2011; Yang, 2009; Huang, Jeng and Huang, 2009). The present study is not without its limitations. Future research can address a few areas.

First of all, this work contains learners. Additional studies should focus on various cultural groups of students and their learning experiences with blogs as cultural differences may go with various understandings and ideas about the usage of blogs. For instance, Yoo and Wen-hao (2011) compared the use and acceptance of Web 2.0 applications between American and Korean college students. The authors found that although Korean students indicated good relations and attitudes towards using blogs, they had high anxiety levels. American students, on the other hand, were more likely to participate in online social communities such as Facebook than using Web 2.0 applications, such as social virtual environment tools.

Second, a further study could also encourage students to continue their communication using blogs with the same group students and investigate their learning experiences; thus continuing the 'community of learners' (Park, Gyeong, &Romee, 2011). "Blogging is a significant factor in making informal learning more enriching and completing for adults. Adults learn more significantly if learning can be self-directed, practical, and reflection-oriented" (Park, Gyeong, &Romee, 2011, p.159).

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