The use of weblog in language learning: motivation of second language learners in reading classroom

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Abstract

The age of technology has enabled learners to interact with other users outside the four walls of the classroom. Weblogs, in particular, provide a channel for asynchronous computer-mediated communication to take place in the learning process. Motivation is one of the learning aspects that is greatly enhanced by the use of technology. Questionnaires and observations were carried out to 108 undergraduate engineering students taking Reading Course to determine the level of the learners' motivation to participate in online discussions and to find out whether interactions through the blog have in any way influenced the level of motivation to participate in face-to-face discussions. Findings indicate that students were highly motivated to participate in discussions through the use of blog, and to use it as a learning tool. However, motivation to participate in class discussions was not affected by the tendency of learners to participate in discussion via the weblog.

Background of the study

Students whose English is the second language (ESL) will have problems using the language to express themselves and to contribute in discussions. Apart from language barrier, cultural aspect also affects the learning style of the students and this is inclusive of their willingness and enthusiasm in participating in discussions held in class. Boondao, Hurst, & Sheard (2008) claimed that students with eastern cultural background tend to be "indirect, implicit and reserved in communication". For these students disagreement and "confrontation" are viewed as negative

elements in communication. Thus, discussions in class can be restrained and responses are rarely elicited from the students.

This indication of lacking in motivation to actively participate in language learning process is the challenge faced by many educators of ESL. The present study was conducted to explore the motivational aspect that has been claimed to be one of the factors influencing the success or failure of any learning process. Pintrich and Schunk (1996) stated that learners' performance and the reason for learning depend very much on the motivational drive a person has. Many studies were conducted to determine the effects of motivational influence on students' achievement (Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito & Sumrall, 1993; Hendrickson, 1997). Findings from numerous studies concluded that the greater the motivation to use the language, the higher the chance of success rate the learners can have. Thus, it is of great importance to foster motivation in the students to use the language and this need to be done in an environment where extrinsic motivation can exist, hence, enhancing the internal motivation of individual student.

Educators have tried to exploit ways to motivate participation of students in discussion so as to enable students to enhance language use. Technological advances in recent years have provided language learning with alternatives to conventional classroom activities and assessments. The advent of World Wide Web has enabled educators and researchers alike to make use of this technological wonder to enhance language learning. Asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC), which is text-based interaction via networked computers is one of the elements that many recent researchers are focusing on to be utilized in language learning process (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). ACMC is not instantaneous, thus, learners have the chance to plan and edit their language productions before posting them online as well as to comprehend postings by other learners before they provide responses.

A number of studies claim that the planning time enabled by ACMC in interactions is significant in enhancing second language learning (Barille & Durso, 2002; Christopher, Thomas & Tallent-Runnels, 2004; Darhower, 2000; Jeong & Frazier, 2008; Long & Robinson, 1998; Ortega, 1999). It has been asserted in many studies that language learning using CMC as at tool generates positive outcome in diverse environments (Alavi & Dufner, 2005; Curtis & Roskams, 1999; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; Warschauer, 1998; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). Blog is one of the ACMC tools that is becoming more prevalent in educational setting in many fields. Studies indicate that the use of blog has enabled students to interact and exchange intellectual discussions (Betts & Glogoff, 2004; Kanuka, Rourke & Laflamme, 2007; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). The present study was carried out to explore the extent to

which online learning tool, with specific reference to the blog, can influence the level of motivation of students to participate in language learning activities as compared to participation in discussions conducted in class.

Motivation and the use of technology in language learning: Constructivism framework

Numerous studies have proven that motivation has great influence on the performance and achievement of students in second language learning (Gardner, 1988; Gardner & Macintyre, 1993; Hendrickson, 1997; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito & Sumrall, 1993; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Motivation as defined by Brown (2001) denotes the drive and grounds for learning a second language, which include "career or academic goal" as well as "social or cultural purposes, and within that purpose, a learner could be driven by a high level of motivation or a low level" (p.75). When motivation is emphasized, the learning environments are customized towards students needs and thus, able to create a conducive setting for learning and constructing knowledge. In the context of the present study, using Web 2.0 technology is a means to enrich the environment which eventually will increase the level of motivation to learn and use the language. By using the language frequently, a chance for students to improve on their language proficiency is higher.

In relation to motivation, constructivism framework incites the quest for providing learners with a rich learning environment. The main reason why this kind of environment is highlighted is because the main focus is "placed on the unique interests, styles, motivations and capabilities of individual learners so that learning environments can be tailored to them" (Reeves, 1992). Constructivism has been diversely defined in relation to a variety of learning fields. Duffy and Cunningham (1996) stated that despite the diversity in definition, the term shares certain common views. Among others are, the notion that learners are involved in "an active process" to construct knowledge and that "instructions" are to facilitate the knowledge constructions and does not function to merely communicate knowledge to the students.

The constructivism framework supports the notion of technology integration in language learning. Sandholtz et al. (1997) claimed that it is in the constructivist teaching methods that technology will be utilised pre-eminently as a tool that supports students' inquisition, reflection, problem solving and "collaborative exploration". The construction and scaffolding of knowledge as grounded by the constructivism theory can happen extensively in a technology-supported learning environment. Bagley and Hunter (1992) asserted that when the learning process is

dynamic and active, students will gain greater retention of information and knowledge triggered by a higher thinking level. In another claim, learning process is student-centred and constructivism illustrates this setting of constructing knowledge as "interactive, inductive, and collaborative, where multiple perspectives are represented, and where questions are valued" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

The use of technology as a tool is in line with the claim of interactivity and collaboration, since students are empowered towards information and "real data" access (Mann, 1994). The collaboration between students and students, teacher and other internet users accessing the blog enhances the process of knowledge constructions. The advent of technology has endowed us with a vast of digital instruments and means to be utilised in language learning. The asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC) tool, in particular reference to the blog, is able to provide effective means of communication and space for students to be involved in the learning process. The most notable feature of ACMC is the "anywhere, anytime" trait that provides opportunity for learning to take place effectively. Numerous studies cited the advantage that this learning tool has to offer in enhancing the learning process (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Weller, 2002; Woo & Reeves, 2007; Young 2003). In the light of present study, as outlined by Wilson (1996), the students were provided with a "setting" or a "space" in which blog was used as a tool to collect and interpret information as well as interact with other users.

Method of the study

Technology has become ubiquitous in language learning. The study conducted was to fundamentally relate the interactive features made available by these technological wonders to the learners' level of motivation. This is investigated from the viewpoints of learners' participation online and offline. Observation and questionnaires were the two means used to obtain data for the study. These two phases of data collection were guided by the following research questions:

1. Does the use of blog increase the level of motivation in students to participate in language learning activities?
2. Does the motivation to participate in activities via blog affect the level of motivation to participate in face-to-face activities in class?

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted in 2008/2009 academic session with 108 students taking Effective Reading (UHL4032) course as part of the University Academic Requirements. The students were grouped by the University Academic Office into four sections and were taught by the two researchers involved in the present study, each with two sections. All participants were second year engineering students and used English as their second language. Students who participated in the study were computer literate with fluent skills in using Web 2.0 interactive applications, in particular, the weblog. 92% of these students have their own blogs created before they took the course and some created their blogs while taking the course. Generally, all participants did not have problems using and exploring the weblog as the tool for learning.

The blog used in the study was one of the Google's internet publishing services. The blog addressed at http://www.blogger.com runs on Google server and associated with Google email account. With this email account, a user may create and host blog accounts and publish online journals, personal or business. Since the blog is funded by on-screen advertisements, it is free to use and that was one of the main reasons why this application was selected as the tool used in the study.

The course and the introduction to the weblog

The course was divided into four units taught in 14 weeks in a semester, as categorized in Table 1. With four contact hours in a week, divided into 2 hours each meeting, students need additional facilitation in improving language competency to complete tasks assigned in class. The use of weblog provides the extensive language support the students need and this can be done beyond the classroom and the class hours.

Table 1. Units in effective reading course

Unit	Component	Duration
1	Introduction to Reading (INT)	2 weeks
2	Repeated Reading (RR)	3 weeks
3	Extensive Reading (ER)	4 weeks
4	Intensive Reading (IR)	5 weeks

In the first meeting of the semester, the researcher introduced the blog to the students and informed them that the blog will be one of the means of communication and they should visit the blog everyday to see if there were announcements made. The students were also encouraged to use the blog to ask questions related to the course or on any academic matters. The researchers emphasized the requirement to use the standard English in blog postings right from the beginning of the semester. This was inclusive of the grammar, lexical and spelling. They were reminded to spell the words accordingly and short forms were not allowed. However, they were given a little freedom to use the Net abbreviations, such as "lol" and "omg", provided that they used the ones in English, and not in the native language.

In Repeated Reading unit, students were required to respond to tasks assigned with regards to reading fluency. The questions and text for the assessment were also posted in the weblog. Students were required to respond to tasks assigned for Extensive Reading component. In this unit, the assessment required students to respond to five online tasks based on the assigned reading. Discussion and finding results in this paper will not include the postings for the assessment. The reason for this is that all students responded to these tasks simply because their postings were given marks and this cannot be considered as an accurate indication of the relationship between the use of weblog and the level of motivation.

In this study, each group was assigned a blog but all the groups were informed of the address of other groups' blog. So, all students can access all four blogs and were allowed to post comments in any of the blogs provided that they identified themselves clearly. However, when they were required to respond to tasks assigned, they were asked to post their responses in the designated blog only.

The Observation

Observation lasted for 14 weeks during the semester to track students' use of the weblog for reading activities assigned as well as for other purposes. Postings were classified according to the four units (Introduction, Repeated Reading, Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading) and subcategorized into 3 types of entry, which are:

1. Responding to tasks (RT)
2. Commenting on others' postings (CP)
3. Personal posts (PP).

"Responding to tasks" included answering questions from reading texts, searching for information, describing experience and opinion, writing summary and completing assigned activities taken from the Workbook in class. "Commenting on others'

postings" included entries that provided feedback, sharing of information and hyperlink as well postings that expressed agreement or disagreement on certain issues discussed online or in class. Postings that could not be classified as responding to tasks or commenting on others' postings, such as asking questions that were not related to any of the tasks assigned or comments that include redirecting to personal blog were categorised under "Personal posts". Some students preferred to post their personal comments in their blogs, but they sometimes used the class blog as a medium to direct their friends to their personal blogs. All these activities were noted by the researchers throughout the semester and analysed after week 15 ended.

In-class observation was also carried out throughout the 14 weeks and notes were taken on students' participation in discussions and other language learning activities. Students' participations were documented and classified into the three categories as used for blog posting entries. Each time the students participated, the researchers would put a mark in the appropriate column in which the three categories (RT, CP, PP) were organized. Columns were marked only when students participated individually. Responses given in groups will not be considered, but remarks were jotted down in the observation log indicating the occurrence of group responses. By the end of each week the marks were calculated and recorded in the Microsoft Excel sheets. After the 14th week, the numbers were summed up and calculated to find the average number of participation of one student in a semester. This data were then compared with the data from blog entries.

The survey

A survey to investigate the students' level of motivation to participate in online reading activities via the weblog was conducted at the end of the 14th week. The questionnaire included 22 items adapted from Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). 11 items were structured questions requiring students to select one choice from three options and 11 items required students to respond using a Likert scale. Students were to respond whether they "strongly agree", "agree", "are uncertain", "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statements given. Since the questionnaire was adapted and changes were made, a pilot survey was carried out prior to the semester-end survey administration to determine internal consistency. Cronbach alpha was determined as 0.84. The questionnaires were returned to the researchers on the same day of administration after the students completed responding to the survey items. The data were analysed quantitatively using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and tabulated in means and standard deviation.

Findings and discussions

The descriptions in this section will be organised according to the research questions of the present study. In addition to that, other related findings will also be included encompassing the issue of enhancement of students' language use and language learning. A total of 3539 postings were recorded in the blogs throughout the 14 weeks of the semester. Table 2 classified the number of postings according to the units of the course and categories of postings.

Table 2. Blog Postings

Subcategory	Introduction to Reading (INT)	Repeated Reading (RR)	Extensive Reading (ER)	Intensive Reading (IR)	Total Postings
Responding to Tasks (RT)	52	473	721	385	**1631**
Commenting on others' postings (CP)	108	552	775	44	**1479**
Personal posts (PP)	21	72	145	191	**429**

In unit 1, there were only 2 tasks assigned and for one of the tasks the students were asked to work in groups and post their responses as a group. Tasks given for Repeated Reading strategy required students to record their reading and explain on their experience as well as views on their own reading fluency. The highest number of entries came from Unit 3, Extensive Reading (ER). The need to read extensively from a variety of reading resources encouraged the students to share their findings and resources. That is one of the reasons why there were many postings that can be subcategorised under CP.

The first concern that is addressed in this study is the level of motivation to participate in language learning activities assigned online using blog as a tool.

Does the use of blog increase the level of motivation in students to participate in language learning activities?

Survey data and observation data

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for the two items measuring students attitude towards the use of blog in their learning activities. Results show that students provided positive responses where they enjoyed using blog to complete activities assigned in the course (mean=4.01). More than two third of the students expressed willingness to participate in discussions posted in the blog (mean=4.14). The data derived from these two items indicate that students' attitude towards the use of blog is very positive and most of them were motivated to use the blog in completing tasks and participating in discussions.

Table 3. Attitudes towards Blog Participation

Item	Attitude towards Using Blog		
	n	Mean	Std Dev
I enjoy completing activities in the blog (n=108)	108	4.01	1.05
I will participate in discussions posted in the blog	107	4.14	1.07

Scale: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=uncertain; 4=agree; and 5=strongly agree

Another item to be highlighted in this discussion is the students' effort in the completion of tasks via blog. An item from the questionnaire is highlighted here to illustrate this matter. To analyse this question, the data were valued as 3 for option "*a. immediately ask the teacher for help*", 2 for option "*b. only seek help if the tasks are evaluated*" and 1 for option "*c. just forget about it*".

> *When I have problems completing activities in the blog, I....*
>
> > *a. immediately ask the teacher for help*
> >
> > *b. only seek help if the tasks are evaluated*
> >
> > *c. just forget about it.*
>
> Note: n=107; Mean= 2.63; Std Dev = 0.68

Result implies that most students were willing to be involved in language learning activities and solved problems by seeking the teacher's help regardless of whether the tasks were part of evaluation or not (mean=2.63). This shows great motivation in students to use the blog as a tool of communication and learning. In contrast, students would rarely ask the teacher for help in class, if they had problems with their learning. Observation revealed that most students preferred to ask their friends

if they faced problems or unsure of anything related to tasks given. But this was not the case with discussion or task completion via blog. Asking for teacher's help was noted to be the option chosen by most students and this was further supported by the data gathered from observation on the blog participation.

As asserted by Esch (1996), flexibility of learning environment is important to encourage learning, and this includes customising the environment to one that can support the needs and appeal of the learners. Data gained from the survey imply that blogging can provide the supportive environment that students need in order to enhance motivation as well as learning. This inference corresponds to Goldfarb's (1999) belief that students' motivation is enhanced by the use of technology as a learning tool since it is on its own "can be engaging". Sandholtz et al. (1997) cited a research finding similar to the present study. A project known as The Apple Classroom of Tomorrow discovered that the use of computer incites interest and excitement in the students towards their learning. Students involved in the project showed an increased time spent on their work outside their classroom. This learning environment created a space for independent learning and exploration where skills were further developed.

In order to determine whether the motivation level for participation has increased when students used the blog in contrast to in-class discussion, a comparison was made by means of analyzing the data gathered from the survey and the observation. The data in Table 4 indicate significant difference in the number of participation of students in the two learning approaches. The most significant difference can be seen in activities under Repeated and Extensive Reading in which the number of blog postings is almost twice higher than in-class participation. Thus, the concern on the increase of motivation level can be construed as to have been notably achieved.

Table 4. Number of Participations

Units	On-blog participation	In-class participation
Introduction to Reading (INT)	186	58
Repeated Reading (RR)	1097	618
Extensive Reading (ER)	1641	832
Intensive Reading (IR)	620	430
Total Postings	**3539**	**1998**

The analysis of the data gathered from the observation and the survey indicate that students' motivation level to participate in learning activities had significantly increased as compared to participation in activities conducted in class.

Motivation and language use

Since reading was the language aspect emphasised in the course, concerns for matters pertaining this focus were also considered in the study. This aspect of language learning is related to the motivational concerns focused in the study. The purpose of this highlight is to enable the researchers to further improve the course offered to the students in coming semesters.

There is an apparent correlation between motivation and language use. Many researchers affirm that when students have high motivation to learn they will use the target language in the process (Wlodkowski, 1985; Schunk, 1996; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Relatively, as claimed by the constructivists, it is in the process of using the language in the social and contextual collaborations that they actually construct their knowledge and eventually able to improve their proficiency skills (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). MacNamara (1973) asserted that 'the really important part of motivation lies in the act of communication and that this is an important way in which intrinsic interest in second language learning may be achieved' (p.252). In the case of the present study, the language skills that were enhanced using the blog as the tool include both reading and writing. Students were able to complete reading tasks successfully and at the same time, since they communicated through writing in the blog using standard English, their language proficiency that was manifested in a form of writing has also improved.

Another issue that can be considered as successful in enhancing students' language learning is the level of interest in reading itself. From the comments posted in the blog, it can be deduced that most students did spend some times doing extra reading on top of the ones assigned to them for the activities. Some comments pointed out the fact that the students had actually visited the sites suggested by other students on certain issues discussed in relation to the tasks given.

Blog participation vs. face-to-face participation

Despite the fact that the use of blog has given many benefits to the course of language learning, there are challenges that need to be overcome. In the study conducted, a concern over the extent of the technological influence has on the whole learning process was addressed. The discussion on this matter was the focus of the second research question of the study:

Does the motivation to participate in activities via blog affect the level of motivation to participate in face-to-face activities in class?

To explicate this question, the data gathered from the blog postings were compared to the log noted from in-class participation observation. Table 5 on the average posting per student illustrates the level of motivation of students' participation in the two discussion methods.

Table 5. Average Posting Per Student

Units	On blog participation	In class participation
Introduction to Reading (INT)	2	1
Repeated Reading (RR)	10	6
Extensive Reading (ER)	15	8
Intensive Reading (IR)	6	4

The number of average posting per student in the blog is significantly higher than the number of average participation per student in discussions held in class. This is clearly illustrated in participations in activities assigned for Repeated Reading and Extensive Reading where the number of average posting per student in blog is almost two times higher than in-class participation. Even though the number of postings in the blog is significantly high, the level of motivation to participate in class remains low. From the observation log, a student may have posted 10 postings in the blog, but remained passive in class and only responded when his name was called out. The average number of participation in class indicated in Table 5 was mostly elicited responses to questions by the researchers.

It was very rare to find students voluntarily giving responses individually. Once in a while, instructors will get a student to raise hand voluntarily to give answers. Most of the time, when a question was posed, students will say their answers together. Thus,

instructors will hear murmurs of voices and the answers were given anonymously. When a student's name was called out, he would try to provide the answer. There were also times when the student called out just kept quiet or shook the head indicating that he did not know the answer.

Giving opinion is another activity that was in very few occasion had it been successful. There were occasions when asked about their opinion on the texts read, they would murmur something but not audible to the instructor. With insistent probing and names called out, sometimes the instructors might get responses from the students.

Lee and Ng (1994) specified "voluntariness" as a feature that is required for learning independently. Students who are not dependent will be able to critically respond to issues posted and have the courage to voice out their views. However, it was rare to find a student voluntarily raising his hand to offer views or to agree and disagree with the instructor or other students. When a student responded to a question, the instructor would ask other students if they agreed, disagreed or had anything else to add. Most of the time, students would not comment on others' answers and would just say that they did not have anything to add.

Data from the observation note a discouraging motivation level of students to participate in discussion held in class despite the fact that the attitude towards discussions or task completion was very positive using the blog as the means of communication. Hence, it can be concluded that the level of motivation to participate in discussion via blog did not affect the level of motivation to participate in discussions held in class.

Conclusion

Technology as used in language learning is irrefutably a dynamic substance. The progress and changes are escalating, thus influencing on how language educators design the learning materials and approaches. Weblog has a lot to offer to educators and researchers in their quest to assist students in enhancing the learning process. The ability to identify the technological aid that can provide the essence of effective learning and teaching is crucial in ensuring the achievement of the desired outcome. Further research is needed to establish connections between the increased motivation level to participate in online discussion and in-class participation. Ways and methods that can help extend the positive effects that blogging tool has on students to in-class discussion can be indentified through expansive studies and inquiries. Physical and psychological factors like class size and social presence may

have certain effects on the use of technological and participation in face-to-face interaction (Aragon, 2003; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). A number of studies have provided insights on diverse issues that may have influenced online and offline interactions, such as learning environment features and peer communication (Arbaugh, 2000; Heckman & Annabi, 2005). Contending with the difference of these online and offline interactions can assist in delineating the aspects that should be considered to increase the chance of their successful application in the learning process.

The advance of technology is inexorable and exploiting this tool in teaching and learning is a means to achieving greater heights in educational domain. Ensuring that the technological aids included in pedagogy and instructional designs are beneficial to students and educators is of utmost importance. As the data from this study suggest, the use of blog has enabled teachers and learners to actively interact and participate in learning. Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that the entirety of learning achievement must be viewed at diverse angles. Apart from facilitating the learning process, studies regarding issues of instructional design should be considered in order to successfully integrate these technological tools with a variety of teaching strategies in enhancing language learning.

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