

PERSONALIZING POTENTIALS OF WEBLOG IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

A weblog (also called a blog) has been pervasively used as an alternative language learning technology in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. However, there are still limited attempts to shed more lights on the (a) integration of various applications in the blog and (b) how they can be maximized for teaching and learning purposes in the context of Indonesian higher education. Therefore, this study aims to explore issues concerning the use of a tutor blog run in an English Education Study Program of a private university. The exploration focuses on the potentials of the tutor blog and their relevance to current blogging activities as well as draws on related literature and reflective experiences in utilizing the blog in EFL classrooms. This study seems to confirm the potentials of the tutor blog, as asserted by Campbell (2003). The analysis also reveals some possibilities of integrating the blog into other technological applications, which should be beneficial for pre-service and in-service EFL teachers who wish to utilize blogs to support their pedagogical agendas. The study concludes with directions for further studies.

Keywords: weblog, technology, EFL teachers, EFL classrooms

Introduction

What is a weblog or a blog? It is a web-based application for entering, displaying, and editing information online (Crystal, 2006) and is usually arranged chronologically from the older information at the bottom and the most recent post at the top of the main page of the blog (Guttler, 2011). A blog resembles an online diary that everybody can read (Harmer, 2007). Its users can edit and update the content of their blog posting whenever they are connected to the Internet (Tseng, 2008). To create a blog site, users should initially have a Gmail account and register to one of dozen free-access blog sites, such as www.blogger.com, founded by San Fransisco Company, Pyra Labs in 1999 (Marcus, 2010). After finishing the registration process and creating their blog-site address, e.g., nice.blogspot.com, users can start to post any information on their blog. Everyone who knows the blog address and has an Internet connection can read and leave comments on the post.

What are the functions of a blog? Justin Hall created the first weblog site (<http://links.net/vita/web/original.html>) in 1994 and used it to publish his writing

online, including some links and pictures (Creative Blog Staff, 2014; Thompson, 2006). A blog now has more various functions than just publishing online diaries. For instance, people start to use their blogs in education, journalism, and commercial sectors (Campbell, 2003). Some use their blog to publish their interest and work in photography, recipes, and even spirituality (Guttler, 2011).

In education, the blog has long been central in research, which is indicated by the bulk of international studies investigating its potentials and drawbacks for teaching and learning in different settings. For instance, Campbell (2003) developed frequently-cited categories of the blog for language learning purposes. The first category is the tutor blog, which is run by a classroom tutor for his/her learners and becomes the focus of the present study. The second category is the learner blog, which can be managed by individual learners or a group of students. The last type is the class blog, which is as a result of collaboration among the tutor and all of the students in a class. In the United States, Ray and Hocutt (2006) communicated with 16 K-12 in-service teachers who used a blog in their teaching practices. They found out that the blog promoted reflective practice, supported collaboration, and social interaction among its users. The essence of cooperation was also reinforced in Hossain and Quinn's (2012) study, which regarded the blog as a tool to enable students to communicate and collaborate with their peers and teacher. Tseng (2008) investigated the use of weblogs, namely the tutor blog and learner blogs in English classes. The study involved 55 students who mostly showed positive attitudes towards the blogs in their EFL classes; the blogs allowed the students to practice their writing and learn from their peers. Nevertheless, the study found out some challenges in using the blog in language teaching, such as lack of feedback and correction from teachers, students' passive behavior, and computer problems.

Other studies concurred benefits of blogs for language learning. In a South Australian Certificate of Education context, Morgan (2009) reported the use of blogs as a platform for completing tasks. The students read a text on a particular issue, analyzed and interpreted it, and wrote their analysis on a blog posting. In the same year, Yang (2009) studied the use of blogs as an avenue for critical reflections of 43 EFL student teachers on their language learning process and on how blogs influenced their professional development. To achieve the objective, two instructors created a blog to serve as a discussion platform where the students engaged and examined their reflection process. The study concluded that the blog could be a medium for reflection, although the students faced anonymity issues when blogging. For instance, some students were anxious if people read their critical postings that probably could hurt their friends or influence their final grade. Aydin (2014) conducted an extensive review of previous studies of blogs in EFL learning contexts and made some positive conclusions on their use for language learning. The researcher contended that blogs had a crucial role in enhancing students' interactions in the target language, reading processes, sharing and exchanging knowledge, learning motivation, and attitudes. Further, the researcher explained that blogs facilitated the students' writing activities, such as designing and revising their written works, giving and receiving feedback, and participating in peer review activities. However, the researcher reported that blogs did not impact on fluency, accuracy, language complexity, or pronunciation of EFL students who learned to speak. In Turkey, the most recent study was

conducted by Akdag and Özkan (2017), who sought to find out if writing blogs effected on the high school students' writing skills. Their study indicated that the blog had the potentials to enhance students' vocabulary and contribute to their syntactic accuracy.

To sum up, the following may be stipulated concerning the previous studies and related literature on the blog. Researchers have confirmed potentials and revealed some challenges of using the blog for teaching and learning practices in different learning contexts. The previous studies inform the current research to shed more light on the in-depth explorations towards more technological applications available in the blog that can be maximized for pedagogical purposes specifically in EFL classrooms in an Indonesian higher education context. With this in mind, the present study presented a detailed and practical discussion on the blog applications specifically for supporting and facilitating EFL learning. The paper did not address a particular problem. Yet, the discussion should assist EFL teachers in applying the technology, in exploring ideas about how their students could benefit from the use of an educational tutor blog, and in looking for online teaching resources to support their teaching practices. Moreover, the study averred practical discussions on what the teachers should do with their blog so that they could utilize it more maximally in their present EFL classrooms.

Method

The study implemented a document analysis as a research method, which was to identify unique characteristics in written or visual materials (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2019) and to study excerpts, quotations, or entire passages in program records (Patton, 2002). In this study, the analyzed document was a tutor blog (<http://oursmileenglish.blogspot.com/>) that I have been using to support my teaching in English Language Education Program at Kasih University (ED-KU) (pseudonym). The data analysis was focused on confirming some potentials of the tutor blog, as stated by Campbell (2003). They were (a) promoting exploration of English websites, and (b) encouraging online verbal exchange using comment buttons. Other potentials included (c) providing a class or syllabus information, and (d) serving as a resource for self-study. These four potentials would be the themes in the discussion that was supported by related literature and some photographs to corroborate the potentials of the blog. All figures to illustrate ideas were placed in the Appendix. I would also enhance the discussion by involving personal narratives, as what has been done in Wahyudi's (2016) study, particularly in utilizing the blog in my EFL classrooms. Readers may put different meanings (Mendez, 2013) and make a personal connection with experiences and practices (Vasconcelos, 2011) presented in this paper.

Findings and Discussion

Before moving on, I should acknowledge that the discussions were based on my practices in using the blog, and I did not implement the peer-debriefing strategy (e.g., in Ary et al., 2019; Forber-Prat, 2015) involving people outside this study to determine if the presented discussions made sense and were reasonable. Therefore, I did not intend to generalize ideas in this paper to a broader audience, and points mentioned in this article should be treated as informative rather than

persuasive. In the next sections, my analysis confirmed the potentials of the tutor blog as established by Campbell (2003).

English websites

Teachers could integrate useful links to educational sites in every posting they make on the blog (Campbell, 2003). For instance, in my academic writing class, I provided some links to open and free-access educational journals from which my students could read and download scholarly articles to support their writing (see Figure 1). Some of the journals included Beyond Words (<http://journal.wima.ac.id/index.php/BW/index>) and Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching (<http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/>). After downloading some articles, my students were asked to highlight ideas they might use to support their arguments. I also instructed them to study (and borrow) phrases and academic vocabulary (e.g., to introduce gaps in the literature or to write a concluding section) from articles they have downloaded as shown in excerpt 1 below.

Excerpt 1

These previous studies inform the current study in response to the need for...

The contribution of the study is to...

The merit of the study is...

Throughout [the present study], there are some success stories and challenges.

[taken from Widodo, Budi, & Wijayanti, 2016, p. 35, 44]

Other links that I posted in the blog included information about educational technology for teachers, types of poems, and how to write a biography. I also posted some links to listening resources that the students can visit outside the class. In addition to using a PC or a laptop, students could open the links through their smartphones.

Online communication

Teachers could use the comment button at the bottom of each entry to ask questions, give feedback, and encourage their students to engage in an online discussion (Campbell, 2003). Then, people who have access to the site can comment on the posting. In my creative writing class, I asked my students to post (publish) their English poems to their blog. Then, I divided the class into some groups that usually consisted of four to five students in each group. Afterward, I explained that the group members were the students' blogging buddies (Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma, 2007) who had to visit blogs of their group mates, read the poems, and leave some constructive comments on the poems.

The feedback by the blogging buddies was focused on the content and suggestions for improvement. The students might respond to the feedback posted for their poems. Some previous studies would seem to indicate positive trends of doing the online discussion (Ward, 2004; Yuen & Cheung, 2013) that provided the students with constructive feedback on their writing (Hossain & Quinn, 2015; Mali, 2015). However, EFL teachers needed to consider a concern that students might feel uneasy about letting more people other than their classroom teacher read their work due to their writing skills (Lin, 2015). In that situation, the students might feel unsure about how they should respond to the feedback.

I did some ways to enhance the students' interests and motivation to participate in the online discussion and to respond to the issues revealed by the previous studies. First, I included classroom participation, such as the blogging activities and in-class interactions, as a part of a scoring system in the class syllabus. Then, I convinced my students that doing the online discussion was their opportunities to practice their English. Therefore, making some grammatical mistakes in their written work and communication was considered as a part of learning processes. Third, I displayed and discussed some of my students' poems and feedback left on the blog through the classroom projector in the class session. I also had to participate actively in the discussion by leaving comments on the students' poems to promote a feeling of appreciation among my students, especially when they knew that their teacher read their work. The teacher's participation responded to the passive behavior of the students when they participated in blogging activities, a problem articulated in Tseng's (2008) study.

To invite more readers outside the classroom (although it is optional), I always challenged my students to post their poems to their social media and ask their friends to read and leave some comments to the poems. In this case, I also actively promoted my students' poems by sharing the link to their blogs through my Facebook status.

Excerpt 2

Pagi-pagi baca puisi mahasiswa [reading students' poem in the morning]
[My Facebook status on September 12, 2017, at 10.01 am]

Therefore, the students should write their poems carefully as people outside their classrooms might read their work. Different from Lin (2015), exposure to a broader audience was thought as opportunities to receive more feedback (Purcell, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013), and increase students' satisfaction that might enhance their motivation (Dornyei, 2001).

Class information

Teachers could use entries in their blog as a warm reminder of any assignments to complete and as further clarification on challenging areas of classroom work (Campbell, 2003). Besides, they could include a link to a classroom syllabus in the entries. I have been doing the same practices in my tutor blog. For instance, in my extensive listening class, I used the blog to post information related to writing a reflective journal as an assignment that my students had to complete (see Figure 2). In my creative writing class, I used the blog as a portal of all students' blogs that contained English poems written for classroom assignments. With the portal, I could easily ask my students to visit their friends' blogs and leave comments on the poems.

In addition to posting the information, I used the blog as an avenue to disclose my students' digital poster as a classroom project (see Figure 3) specifically to show my appreciation toward their hard-work in designing the poster. After that, I shared the link to the poster on my Facebook account to invite people outside the classroom to view the poster. Other sharing information practices were related to posting names of students' group members and final grades, sharing links to a classroom syllabus, a classroom presentation, and a sample of written work.

Links for self-study

Campbell (2003) noted that the blog enables teachers to set up permanent links to online quizzes, audio for listening practices, and other educational websites, in the right or left margin of the blog. In my writing classes, I used this facility to create links to my YouTube channel, where my students could watch and listen to my feedback on their written work. With this link, they can study the input repeatedly outside the classroom. The idea to record the feedback and publish it in YouTube was not to digitalize the traditional feedback method where teachers circled any grammatical problems in the students' work, wrote some of them on the classroom whiteboard, and discussed them together in the classroom. Instead, the video was to give a multimodal form of feedback and allow the students opportunities to study the input outside the classroom. Also, it was a way to anticipate that not all students remembered all points discussed in the classroom and probably made some notes of the class discussion.

Another similar case was in my writing for media class where I had to discuss how to write references based on the APA referencing format. I regarded the discussion as a challenging activity as my students had to study various rules, such as when to use of a capital letter, italicize a name of a journal, write the page number of a journal, and many other related rules. In this case, I decided to record my explanation on the referencing rules, publish it in the YouTube, and share its link in a blog posting (see Figure 4). I asked my students to regularly watch the video to help them remember the rules when they wrote any supporting references in their writing work. With the recording, I did not need to explain the same concept repeatedly in the classroom so that I could allocate more times to discuss other writing theories.

EFL teachers might consider using Screencast-O-Matic (SOM) application (<http://screencast-o-matic.com/home>) to create similar lecturing videos. In brief, SOM is a free web-based program and identical to video lecturers (Powell & Wimmer, 2014). It can capture images on a computer desktop, record voice, and allows teachers to save the video to share with their students on their digital devices (Peery, 2013). The free version of SOM allows its users to create a fifteen-minute-video in every screen capture. For teachers, SOM can assist them in presenting a lecture video, provide instruction of a particular assignment, and feedback for their students.

Recently, I am advancing the use of link sharing by integrating Hot Potatoes (HP) to the blog. In brief, HP is a free downloaded software designed by Half-Baked Software, Inc and is available at <http://hotpot.uvic.ca>. It has five programs, namely JQuiz, JCloze, JCross, JMix, and JMatch (Arneil, Holmes, & Street, 2004). These programs enable users to create interactive Web-based exercises (Winke & MacGregor, 2001), including multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering, and gap-fill exercises. I have created some simple grammar and vocabulary exercises using HP and uploaded them to the blog (see Figure 5), so my students can access them outside the classroom. EFL teachers might consider the exercises as a supplement for a classroom discussion.

I maintained my previous discussion (Mali, 2016) on the advantages of using HP as teachers will not need to subscribe and be connected to the Internet when they want to create exercises. When integrated into the blog, the exercises can be

accessed publicly not only by students in their classroom but also by readers who probably wish to access the language exercises. Importantly, the software can help its users to check answers they give to the practices, so the teachers no longer need to read their students' work one by one, check whether their answers are correct, and put any signs for their right or wrong answers. Further, I believe that HP is so easy to use that teachers should not feel doubts (as concerned by Javad & Leila, 2015) about technical problems in the technology (as problematized by Wichadee, 2014) when they utilize HP in their teaching practices. Nevertheless, I understand that HP can be considered as an old technology application; therefore, people may say that teachers should prefer the most recent technology to facilitate their teaching practices. On the other hand, I would postulate that blogs may be an avenue to disclose the HP exercises where the teachers only need to tell the link of the tasks to their students. Then, the students can directly go to the link and do the exercises without signing up to the blog site.

Conclusion

Some conclusions were drawn. First, the present study confirms the potentials of the tutor blog, as asserted by Campbell (2003). Second, it has provided practical discussions on how the tutor blog is used in the recent teaching practices, particularly in EFL classrooms in the Indonesian higher education context. Third, the discussion reveals some potentials of the integration of the blog to other technological applications, such as HP and SOM. The combination of blogs with the applications still seems to be scarce in literature; therefore, it may be a subject for further explorations specifically on how the integration can provide EFL students with more rooms for self-study outside their classroom and to what extent the integration can encourage them to be more independent language learners. Next, the blog is only a tool that should be supported with pedagogical activities to help students achieve their learning goals. The discussion in the present study was limited to one tutor blog, which makes this study inconclusive. Therefore, future researchers should study some tutor blogs run in EFL classrooms from different countries and explore other applications available in the blog and their potentials especially to learn speaking skills, which to the best of my knowledge, is still limited in numbers. Also, it would be advisable to study the effect of the online feedback on the students' work posted in the blog to the enhancement of their grammatical accuracy. In closing, "the technology is as transformational as we make it. It's not the tool that counts; it's what we do with it" (Muhtaris & Ziemke, 2015, p. 13).

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