Exploring the Educational Benefits of Blogs to Help Non-Malay pupils in Malay Language Learning

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Abstract— Language learning environment plays an important role in the acquisition of students' second language, and its imperative grows more and more crucial when students learn another language (e.g., when non-Malay students are learning the Malay language). Some students have been observed to be unmotivated and even less willing to speak in the intended language due to prevailing learning environment they are entrenched in. In view of this current learning milieu, educators should seek new, novel learning environments that appeal to students, especially the non-Malay students, in learning the Malay language. Blog is one of the alternatives that could be tapped on as 'blogging' promotes the 'authenticity' sought by teachers to retain students persistently in language learning, as well as to allow students to experience diverse, rich cultures. Therefore, teachers should integrate blogs in their writing classes in well-planned learning activities that would gradually improve pupils' writing skills, particularly the non-Malay students. Being a new concept as a learning tool in Malaysia, blogs provide many new opportunities for teachers to explore their efficacy in Malay language writing. Premised on this need, this paper discusses some of the affordances of blog in supporting the second language teaching and learning, especially in writing skills.

Keywords- blog; second language learning; non-Malay, Malay Language; writing skills; learning platforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning a second language poses a host of challenges to non-native speakers of that language. Thus, it is critical that educators exploit existing technologies, notably the Web 2.0 technologies to help improve students' language skills. Among these technologies, Web 2.0 seems to be a potent teaching and learning tool, which could be integrated into current teaching and learning practices. According to Read [1], based on the analysis of six teenagers' blogs, the writing process during blogging helps students become better writers, especially those who are not keen in writing. This important finding is not surprising because blogs has many applications that could be used and exploited, particularly in the context of educational environment [2]. Blogging provides students the opportunities that were previously not available to them—the opportunities to communicate, interact, collaborate, write and display their work to readers other than teachers. With no special skills needed in creating a blog, internet users could create simple online contents to share with others anywhere, anytime [3].

Despite the many educational benefits of blogs in teaching and learning, their use and integration in classroom in Malaysia is still new, therefore entailing many in-depth studies pertaining to their effects in the teaching and learning processes across a spectrum of cultural and social aspects. More importantly, more research is needed to investigate students' perceptions of blogs as a learning tool given the rapid growth of Internet users in Malaysia [4]. Naturally, it is anticipated that deeper Internet penetration would spur greater use of the many social networking sites, namely blogs among the student population. Both teachers and students could capitalize on the many educational opportunities of this tool if its affordances are better understood and utilized. However, it is worth to note that there would be pitfalls if the technology is used without proper planning—a predicament that befell on other previous technologies. Research findings indicate that the use of blogs in language learning is facing many challenges. Blogs—despite its overt hype—do not necessarily make students enthusiastic in language learning. Many factors that preclude wide use of blogs in learning have been reported in the literature: lack of computing skills among the pupils, slow access to the Internet, and poor proficiency in English (as the dominant medium of communication in the cyberspace). Among these, the latter poises prominently in the learning of English among Malaysian students, as their command of English are weak. Being a medium that is primarily in written form, blogging can be arduous (even to the point of detest) for pupils lacking the writing skill [5]). Nonetheless, blogging provides a semblance of authenticity and interactivity that are highly regarded by most students and teachers who need to communicate with one

another either inside or outside the classrooms. For students with public speaking fear, blogging offers opportunities for them to express their opinions through writing without the usual reservation, thus improving their writing skills over the long term.

II. ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF WRITING SKILLS

Writing a composition involves a process of selecting, merging, arranging and developing ideas into effective sentences, paragraphs, and longer discourse units. According to Kamus Dewan [6], a composition is a creation or a design, whereas Za'aba (cited in Kamaruddin, [7]) poignantly notes that a composition is an outcome of skilful arrangement of words to become chains of words and then turned into sentences. He also stresses that a composition contains verses that are composed or arranged as stories, reports, or presentations. On the other hand, Lado, Broto, Bullock and Isaac (cited in Kamaruddin, [7]) view a composition as not only a clever arrangement of words and normal sentences, but a skilful expression of ideas, facts and others, which exists in the human's (composer's or writer's) mind through a method of communication which is called language [7]. Thus, composing intellectual materials would entail a strong foundation in language writing that language students must possess. In a nutshell, underdeveloped or poor writing skill could lead to poor writing performance; and the problem would be compounded when learning to write in a second language.

Several studies have been conducted to examine the problems of Malay language writing of non-Malay students, which have revealed an insightful mosaic of findings. Primarily, these students' native languages do not have the same linguistic structure of the Malay language that makes writing in the latter language challenging [8]. Chin [9] found that more than 70% of Chinese students were not interested to read and write in Malay. Likewise, Tay [10] found that 84.8% of Chinese students were not interested in learning Malay that was attributed to their excessive emphasis on the perceived importance of their first language. The unfortunate outcome of the lack of emphasis on learning the national language would result in poor achievement, as non-Malay pupils, particularly those of the vernacular schools, do not possess adequate command of the subject matter [11].

One of the many reasons cited is the current practice where children (who have also learned other second languages) of a particular group would invariably speak and write in only one language—their mother tongue [11]. For example, Indian pupils are more likely to use Tamil rather than Malay language at their homes when interacting with their family members. This prevailing scenario is further reinforced when both parties who could actually speak in Malay (albeit some common errors), but for some cultural reasons they do not see the importance of practicing the Malay language. Over the long term, the little knowledge or skills in Malay that they have would gradually diminish due to lack of practice—a common predicament confronting the knowledge or skills that were previously acquired. Similarly, Campbell [12] argues that once students leave the classroom, they re-enter the world of first-language speakers, which limits opportunities to practice what they have already learned. In Malay language learning, some

students have been observed to commit many errors in writing essays that reflect their poor knowledge and skills in the subject matter ([13], [14], [15]). The situation becomes more damaging as many Non-Malay students have been found to be apathetic in learning the Malay language and writing, which bodes unhealthy development in Malaysia's nation building given the language's status as the national language of Malaysia ([6], [16]). From the academic perspective, it is important for students to master the skills to write in Malay language as essay writing contributes a substantial percentage of the overall grade of the Malay language examination; thus, poor ability to write may translate into poor performance of the pupils.

Not surprisingly, the findings pertaining to Malay language learning is not unique, as the learning of English by Chinese students has also been found to be problematic due to their poor learning approach [17]. In a strategic sense, these students had to first think in their native language about the concepts to be learned, which were later translated directly into English, thus depriving the proper context of the latter language. The demands of two different languages—the mother tongue and the national language— have been the bane of Malaysian pupils of Chinese and Indian background and other minorities. They are literally trapped between two different realms, with two different needs: using their first language at homes, and speaking and writing in Malay in schools. Making adjustment between these two environments is not only confined to their secondary schooling, but is extended into tertiary level learning as the main medium of instruction is Malay, notably in public institutions of higher learning [18].

Thus, it is incumbent on the teaching profession in Malaysia to seek new, novel methods that would help non-Malay students to learn the national language with greater efficiency. More urgently, the current approach used to teach these students in Malay writing should be re-examined in view of the information and communication (ICT) technology that has pervaded many societies worldwide. Living in the technology-driven environment, students have embraced a new realm that engulfs their world with many modern marvels. They have become socially connected in the wired world, where communication is fast, spontaneous, and all encompassing. One major technology that has transformed our world today is the Web 2.0, which runs a host of communication applications such as blog, face book, twitter, google.doc, linked documents and others; and these social communication tools are collectively known as Social Networking Site (SNS). Among these tools, blogs are making inroads in the educational world because of their attractive features and capabilities: open access to online contents that are available for anyone to read and write anywhere, anytime.

III. THE DEFINITIONS AND BENEFITS OF BLOG

Weblog or blog is a personal journal page or site built through a simple graphical user interface (GUI) provided by a blog software without requiring any knowledge in programming language or technical expertise. The general characteristics of a blog are that it consists of a main page that can be accessed by the world community, as it has links to other blogs or websites, and it is written by an author [19]. In

essence, a blog post is text-based, but it also contains a host of other media: links, images, audio, video, and other interactive multimedia components. These contents are available online, and they are continually being updated to registered users through new posting. Information of a blog is normally archived by means of calendar tagging that helps efficient retrieval of required information for bloggers. According to Armstrong [20], a web blog or a blog is a web-based space for writing and editing of information using a web browser, which can be done easily and quickly as well as displaying its contents for public reading in the form of web pages. Once online, users can express their thoughts easily and quickly using any of the blogging software available. Moreover, blogging is simple and quick—no knowledge of any programming languages is needed nor does it require a blogger to own a server. In addition, some blogs have text-based search engines to help readers find materials of interest. Apart from reading, visitors can also submit their comments to a post.

Technically, a blog is also a content management system (CMS). As a CMS, a blog enables a writer to publish and manage its contents without the need to deal with programming codes. In a similar fashion, but with a social nuance, Huffaker [21] states that blogs have several interesting features that could help create an excellent computer mediated communication (CMC) platform for self-expressions. This kind of expression is a rare opportunity enjoyed by users, which owes much of its existence to one particular aspect of blogging milieu—a free space to disseminate information. From the social point of view, the open, free cyberspace provides a vast number of readers the opportunity to express their personal views for public consumption, which sometimes engenders exciting and cathartic experiences [22]. In a cautionary tone, Hiler [23], an expert in blogging, eloquently describes blogs as the latest disruptive technology—a killer application—that has the capacity to engage people in collaborative activities, sharing of knowledge, reflection, and debates as compared to other complex, expensive technologies.

Blogs, by being a simple communication technology, have tremendous potential to be used as a collaboration tool that serves as a viable platform in the teaching and learning sphere ([1], [16], [24], [25]). In this regard, Ackerman [26] stated that the editing and commenting applications of blogs are useful to students. Moreover, Dieu [27] asserts that blogging provides students an opportunity to maximize exposure to a language in a novel situation, to collaborate with peers, and to communicate with experts. In essence, students are not only offered a simple hub to obtain information related to a particular course that they are enrolled in, but they are also provided with a digital space that allows interactive information exchange among members of the learning community. More importantly, for effective practice in reading and writing, blogs allow students to share their views and ideas that spark discussions, as well as to use a language in a real situation that stimulates, challenges, and complements their learning experiences in classroom.

Other benefits of web logs or blogs have also been examined that revealed many important attributes benefitting many peoples from all walks of life. For students, blogs are inherently motivational because online materials and contents are interactive, dynamic, and media-rich that engages students to produce their best work in reading and writing tasks [28]. From the cognitive perspective, Ellison and Wu [29] emphasize the role of blogs in boosting analytical and critical thinking skills of students during blogging through compliance with the universal rules of etiquette. As a learning space, Williams and Jacobs [22] posit that blogs are a potentially overwhelming technology that could radically transform the teaching and learning landscape in higher institutions of learning. Their firm position is not without reasons as Ferdig and Trammel's [30] study had highlighted that blogging offers four major advantages: helping students to become content experts, raising students' interest in learning, offering students the opportunity to participate, and providing opportunities for students to explore various perspectives both inside and outside the classroom. Besides that, many weblogs provide free creation tools, hosting and space.

IV. BLOGS AND WRITING

Numerous studies on the impacts of using blogs in the writing, and teaching and learning processes have been carried out in developed nations, which revealed many promising insights and views, particularly pertaining to students' writing skills. According to Nelson and Fernheimer [31], pupils could use blogs as virtual student composition books on the website to write and post news, articles, or general information. Succinctly, Hurlbert [32] states that blogging could improve students' writing skills in many creative ways, enabling them to write better and to express their views without reservation. Moreover, Sloan [33] stresses on the unique opportunity offered by blogs, unlike other conventional means, that stimulates students to write consistently. In addition, students could also write persistently in blogs with teachers playing the role of facilitators, which spurs the growth of social learning. Being computer generated, blogs are regularly updated that could improve students' writing skill as they could compose articles or reports for general or specific audience [34].

Another feature that makes blogging popular and well accepted by students is that this type of communication is non-threatening—they could liberally write on many topics without undue worries of the views of others as compared to face-to-face discussions. Thus, discussions through blogging become more fluid with bloggers having less inhibition, which in most cases curtails creative ideas. Based on this premise, blogs provide a viable platform for collaborative work between students and teachers alike. For instance, Kennedy [35] reported that the integration of blogs in English classes in secondary schools could engage students in reading, and a collaborative environment (where students compose articles and receive comments) could be established when this integration is performed optimally [4]. This engaging activity is realized due to students' awareness of the wider scale of readership on the Internet, thus encouraging them to invest greater effort compared to traditional practice that involves communication between students and their teacher only [14]. In this new environment, the teacher becomes a facilitator who guides students on constructive writing through the commenting feature of the virtual composition space.

The debates and treatises on educational benefits of blogs in the classroom have emerged almost a decade ago. For instance,

an article by Oravec [36], entitled "Bookmarking the world" discusses the vital role played by this technology in the development of analytical and critical thinking of students by being more participative and also assertive. The conducive setting helps students define their standpoint and perspective on certain issues through careful, meaningful writing. In this regard, Richardson [37] eloquently states that "... [Blogs] will move writing as a product to writing as conversation or contribution". In essence, the message conveyed is that writing will lead to meaningful outcomes because of blogging. Additionally, his experience dealing with students' blogs has led to the following observations: (i) Students would reflect on what they are writing, (ii) Students would carry on writing about a particular topic over a sustained period of time, (iii) Students would be persistently engaged that leads to further writing and thinking, and (iv) Students would synthesize their disparate learning experiences to better understand their collective relationship and relevance.

One of the important components in the teaching and learning process of writing is getting prompt, accurate feedback. Feedback from peers facilitates collaboration and interaction, which are important in language learning. In conventional setting, this aspect of learning is almost absent after pupils leave their classroom. Thus, the many social communication tools, notably blogs, provide a natural substitute that can connect pupils and teachers. In this respect, blogs fosters collaboration as interaction, communication, and acquisition of feedback (from peers about their writing) are efficiently managed. This type of interaction also motivates students as blogging help clarify and simplify communication that leads to enhanced collaboration of assignments or tasks [2]. The same researcher also observed that two-thirds of the 40 students interviewed preferred blogging to conventional writing, as the former is clearly motivational and engaging compared to the latter.

Apparently, many positive findings with regard to using blogs as a learning tool by students have been reported in the literature of late. However, one particular finding provides the impetus to use blogs as a learning tool in English learning based on the positive perception of students who overwhelmingly had reported strong opinion that blog-supported writing process could improve their English proficiency [38]. In the context of English learning, the language would be more effectively taught and learned if non-English speaking pupils are guided by native speakers. Hence, pupils who are geographically, globally dispersed could capitalize on blogs to get connected with English-speaking peers or experts to gain input or advice concerning their writing works or projects, ultimately honing their writing skill in English.

According to Console, de Laat, Dillon, and Darby [39], students could gain better understanding and knowledge from experts through blogs as they could receive precise concepts and latest information of a particular topic of learning. Likewise, they could attain better comprehension as they interact with their peers to share resources and ideas, as well as to constructively comment on their colleagues' work. Their knowledge is also refined as tutors and teachers could continually provide prompt feedback or input to guide their discussion along the approved, appropriate learning track. In performing all these activities that involve a diverse range of people, a network of knowledge resources is realized, which would continually expand with future interactions. In this setting, students become active participants in the learning process as teachers functions as facilitators, which leads to several productive outcomes that would otherwise be almost absent in conventional writing practices [40].

For Malay language learning, studies on the educational use of blogs are beginning to emerge in the literature. For example, Lee's [41] study found that the academic writing performance and skills of non-Malay students had improved by the use blogs. This finding reinforces the educational impact of the use of blogs as a writing platform for students; however, this benefit entails teachers to integrate this technology into the teaching and learning of writing in schools judiciously. Of late, the focus of research on blogs has veered to other aspects of students learning, namely studies that examined differential learning outcomes of pupils who used blogs as part of their learning process. For example, Du and Wagner [42] found that students' Weblogs performance was a significant predictor of learning outcome for high and low performing students but not for moderate performers. In contrast, the traditional coursework was not predictive to observe this difference among the students. Thus, this crucial finding suggests that a complex web of factors could mediate the positive impacts of educational blogs, which necessitates teachers to carefully consider their pupils' background before implementing blogs as a learning tool.

V. CONCLUSION

Language environment plays an important role in the acquisition of students' second language. Similar condition applies to non-Malay students when learning the Malay language and to Malay students when learning English. The first language of non-Malay students dominates the language environment that shapes the scope and depth of their daily communication at home. A problem arises when students also use their first language in Malay and English Language classes that would interfere with the effective process of learning of these second languages. This problem is further compounded as many non-Malay students have been observed to have less motivation and interest to learn the Malay language. In other words, they learn the subject matter only because of its mandatory status—by being the Malaysia's national language—and not because of their strong desire to learn it. Thus, it is incumbent on educators to seek ways in creating a learning atmosphere or environment that appeals to students, especially the non-Malay students, to learn the Malay language. Currently, there is a growing list of tools available on the Internet, and blogs is one of the many technologies that provide many learning opportunities, especially in learning to write, to students.

Blog is a popular Web 2.0 application, which is rapidly growing with millions of users across the globe. Before entering the educational realm, blogs were mainly used for social communication that connects people to discuss some common themes such as businesses, entertainment, or any general topics. This type of communication is so compelling to

most Internet users because blogs enable anyone to present their views online easily and promptly—a feat that is almost exclusively enjoyed by elite groups with specific skills and knowledge in programming languages. Therefore, through blogs, anyone with internet access can now get connected to communicate or express their views, ideas and comments in blogs. With easy and fast communication, the educational benefits of blogs have been keenly watched under the scrutiny of educational practitioners. As anticipated, the learning community is gradually embracing blogs due to its immediate advantages, notably the provision of a free available virtual space for learners to express their thoughts and to reflect on comments received that enhances their understanding of topics being discussed.

In addition, communication in blogs is rich, lively, and diverse as social interaction encompasses a wide spectrum of users or bloggers: interaction among local peers, interaction between students and teachers, interaction between students and overseas peers, and interaction between students and overseas language experts. The last two types of interaction provide learning opportunities to local students that are hardly available in conventional learning setting. For instance, in the former setting, non-Malay students would be able to discuss a particular topic with their Malay counterparts in Malay language, thus giving an ambience of actual learning context in the target language. Likewise, Malaysian pupils could participate in discussion with English-speaking pupils through blogs, thus resembling the English learning setting. In essence, blogging promotes the "authenticity" sought by teachers, which retains students to continue and remain in language learning, enabling students to gain rich experience from different cultures. Therefore, it is desirable for Malay teachers to integrate blogs in Malay writing classes in order to guide non-Malay students to compose Malay-written prose, articles, and reports that would ultimately help these pupils improve their Malay language learning.

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