

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF USING WEBLOG AS A TOOL TO ENHANCE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' WRITING PROFICIENCY IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of using weblogs in teaching English writing skills to a group of secondary school students in Malaysia. This was done by investigating the students' attitude towards the use of weblog in improving their writing abilities. In this study, a total of nine Form 2 students were selected at random and data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The respondents were asked about their perceptions of the use of weblogs. The findings suggest that the use of weblogs enhanced students' writing skills and led them to achieve higher results in grammar, writing structure and the use of the appropriate vocabulary. The students admitted that they benefited from the feedback given through weblogs as it assisted them in enhancing their writing and also creativity with a view of writing more. The application of weblog in learning was effective and the feedback and interaction significantly helped in the students' learning. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended to use weblogs in teaching English language with a focus on writing with proper support and supervision from the teachers. More studies should be conducted to establish weblog use in education in the long-run.

Keyword(s): *ESL, weblog, writing proficiency, secondary education, student perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, English is considered as second language and the official language of the country is Bahasa Malaysia (Thirusanku & Md Yunus, 2014; Che Musa et al., 2012). Despite the status of English as a second language, university graduates are still known to have poor mastery of the language. To tackle these problems, elaborate support systems are being introduced to improve students' language skills particularly in writing. The Malaysian government has also adopted the CEFR into the education system for the country to conform to the international standards with the goal of attaining bilingualism (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Writing proficiency is a fundamental skill imparted during the formative years of education and continues to develop throughout one's lifetime. Learning to write in a second language, especially English, is important at school age since it enhances children's learning and speaking

abilities. It is the ability of a writer to put down ideas on paper in terms that the readers can understand. However, writing in a second language poses some difficulties; more so to the secondary school students in Malaysia where English is taught as the second language and taught in accordance to the Ministry of Education curriculum. The problem of low levels of writing among learners continues to be a challenge and this calls for new strategies and approaches in teaching language.

Weblogs or blogs have become popular among lecturers and teachers in universities and schools for improving writing skills. They allow learners to write, get feedback and learn in groups thus making them effective tools in the classroom. Incorporation of weblogs into education acknowledges the necessity of proficient writers in the learning and development of the learners involved in second language acquisition.

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of using weblog on students' secondary school students' writing skills. In particular, it aims to discover how weblog can enhance the writing skills and the students' attitudes towards the use of weblog as a learning tool. In achieving these objectives, the research seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the use of weblog in the improvement of language acquisition and make recommendations that can be implemented in the classroom. Therefore, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of using weblogs on English writing proficiency among secondary school students in Malaysia?
2. What are the perceptions of students towards the use of weblog to enhance writing proficiency?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Weblog

According to Maharani et al. (2021), the term "weblog," derived from "log" and "web," is synonymous with "blog" or "blogging." Blogs are web sites on which people post their works which are open to the public and can be used to solve problems of grammar. In this case, teachers can be able to use blogs to give feedback that will improve the writing skills of the students. According to Galien & Bowcher (2010), weblog is a medium of written communication and interaction which is advantageous to many languages. Mynard (2007) affirms that weblog helps to improve students' English skills while Richardson (2009) indicates that early adopters of blogs in education have creatively incorporated the technology to improve learning.

Campbell (2003) defined weblog as an online journal in which students can easily post their opinions and update the internet with their comments, which are response based on the entries. Eastment (2005) defines weblog as a form of online diary or logs of thoughts and reflection whereby the author can post anything and the readers respond by posting their comments. Weblogs are useful in writing classrooms as they enable the students to write on different topics, at their own pace, for different readers, and without the interference of the teacher in terms of correcting and grading (Sun, 2010).

Weblogs are tools for narrating events, sharing multimedia content, and documenting the information. After their availability in the public domain in 2000, blogs have been applied in higher learning institutions and research. They assist learners to move from surface to deep level of learning and promote analysis, relationship and context. Blogs as well are learning journals, which

help in the self-analysis and the development of good study habits that are extensive and intensive.

There are multiple reasons to incorporate blogs in education: they offer students an audience for their writing, offer more reading, develop a classroom culture, increase motivation and establish an archive of student writing (Stanley, 2005). The use of blogs is innovative and gets students interested, however, continued use needs motivation to be made to be done.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Its Impact on Education

According to the UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) (2017), Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) refers to a broad category of technology tools and resources that are employed in the processes of transferring, storing, generating, disseminating or even swapping information. They include computers, websites, blogs, e-mail, live broadcasting technologies such as radio, television, web casting, recorded broadcasting technologies such as podcasting, audio/video players and storage devices and telephony including fixed, mobile, satellite and video conferencing.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is present in society today and it influences different sectors in life including education as highlighted by Yunus, Lubis & Lin (2009). ICT has emerged as a tool to support students in improving the effectiveness of their learning process and as a tool to help teachers with administrative responsibilities, as an information and communication system (Ministry of Education, 2003). The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has formulated policies on ICT as an application for everybody, in teaching and learning and in enhancing management effectiveness (Ministry of Education, 2003). As one of the basic skills needed in life, literacy, numeracy and ICT is essential in preparing for the current challenges (Simmons & Hawkins, 2009). Malaysia has greatly adopted ICT in its education sector and the government has spent a lot of money in putting ICT facilities in schools (Ebrahimi & Yeo, 2013; Mohamad et al., 2018). Teachers undergo training on how to incorporate technology in teaching which makes them ready to use ICT in their practice (Termit & Ganisha, 2014). ICT improves the quality of teaching and learning since it helps students to be more independent, capable and creative (Jo, 2013). It also fosters the higher order thinking skills that are prerequisite for future learning through critical and creative thinking facilitated by technology as stated by Ali (2012).

Writing Skills

Writing is one of the four major skills in language use which include reading, listening and speaking. According to Harmer, writing is a way of using written symbols to convey language, ideas, feelings, and opinions which is a specialized skill because of the involved process. Writing can be described as the ability to think critically in order to come up with good paragraphs that can be understood easily. In contrast to speaking, writing enables a person to think and consult such tools as dictionaries and grammar books to back up the statements that are being made (Harmer, 2007).

Writing is always a challenge especially when it is in English as a second language because grammar has to be precise. Williams (2014) also points out that writing is the way of thinking, thus acknowledging the necessity to teach students critical thinking. Writing is an intellectual and affective process which employs thoughts, reason and feelings in the transmission of messages. Skills in language, especially the written language, are innate but have to be developed through learning and practice. According to Hyland (2003) writing is defined as the ability of the writer to

apply his or her grammatical and lexical knowledge to combine different elements of writing and individual experiences.

Writing proficiency refers to the ability to communicate ideas, information, and thoughts effectively and skillfully through written language. Effective communication can be achieved by the writers and this involves writing in a clear, coherent, and grammatical manner, with proper choice of words and language suitable for the intended audience and the intended use of the document. This efficiency comprises of things like grammar, syntax, organization, style, and the capacity to relay messages that can be understood from the reader. In addition to this, proficient writers also have mastery in language standards, adequate understanding of the subject matter and flexibility in writing styles. The process of attaining writing proficiency is not an easy one but require practice, feedback and time to enhance writing skills.

The grammatical structure plays a large role in the quality of the writing, and the writing courses assist people to form their attitudes to certain subjects. Writing makes it possible to capture ideas, feelings and thoughts, and therefore it is useful in understanding the writer's thought processes and ways of solving problems. It includes the arrangement of words, sentences, and paragraphs to express one's view and can be taken to an art that will be enjoyed by the public. Writing is a unique aspect of language that is an off-line way of communication and self-organizing.

Theoretical Approach

The integration of ICT and the use of a student-centered approach incorporate technology as an effective tool to support the learning process with the focus on students as active participants, collaborators and learners. The selected key components for the research are presented in the following theoretical conceptual framework in Figure 1. The objectives focus on the use of weblog on the improvement of the English writing skills of the secondary level students in Malaysia. For this research, it is crucial to have suitable theories or models that provide guidance for its development. The research emphasises two primary theories: constructivism and blended learning. The main focus is on the learner's language learning process, rather than pedagogy.

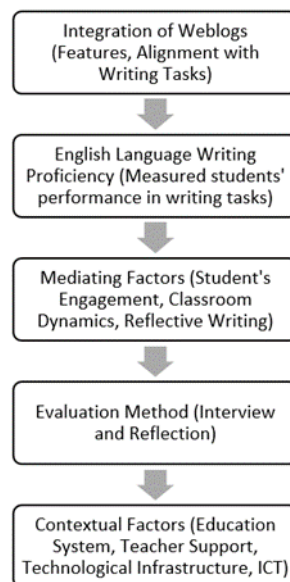


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

A. Interactionist Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory

This research is grounded on the Interactionist Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory that was propounded by Michael Long in the late 1980s. According to Long's theory, social interaction and communication play a very important role in the process of language acquisition. By Long's (1981) definition, 'input' is the language used, and 'interaction' is the role of the language used, for example, as an expansion, repetition or clarification (Tran, 2009). The Interactionist SLA theory also emphasises on meaningful communication in language acquisition and learning and argues that language mastery occurs through meaningful interactions, exchange of ideas and the use of interactive language skills. The Interactionist SLA theory is used in this thesis to examine how weblog can enhance the writing ability of the secondary-level students in Malaysia. The theory of interactive and communicative language experiences of weblog is in accordance with the dynamic and participatory weblog. The study looks at how weblogs enable effective and meaningful communication and interaction towards improvement of English writing skills among students.

B. Influence on Writing Proficiency

The Interactionist SLA theory postulates that learners acquire language by interacting with other people, co constructing meaning, and feedback. In this regard, weblogs are used as open Web-based discussion forums where students can complete real-life writing assignments as well as get feedback and interact with others. It is believed that this kind of learning will help improve the learners' ability to write English. In this respect, the study seeks to confirm the theoretical framework by showing that weblog-based interactive language experience enhances the writing skill.

C. Students' Perspectives

Since the Interactionist SLA theory focuses on social interaction and communication, it is important to know students' views on the use of weblog. The research aims at identifying the students' objective and qualitative perception of weblogs as a tool for enhancing writing skills. This is in accordance with the theory which postulates that the learning of language involves the use of interactive and communicative features.

D. Collaborative Writing

Collaborative Writing (CW) is a process through which the creation of a single text is done by several authors where all the authors are given equal contribution to the final work (Storch, 2011; Coffin, 2020). Team work enhances student participation and interactivity since it is based on students' involvement (Coffin, 2020; Aldossary, 2021; Sanvicens, 2020). As a form of CW, weblogs or blogs offer a special kind of environment that benefits cognitive processes and the audience (Coffin, 2020). Through collaborative blogging, there is growth in idea generation from a group, which enhances the understanding of the readers' expectations as well as the variation in ideas.

CW on weblogs enables students to improve their linguistic proficiency by focusing on language details, sharing ideas and completing written projects that can demonstrate various aspects of language. This makes the group to be responsible and solve problems together thus producing good writing as compared to the traditional method (Coffin, 2020). To enhance CW, weblog should be used in the most effective manner possible by the educators and this can be done by creating activities that will encourage cooperation and interaction. The use of CW tasks on weblogs enhances students' writing skills as they are able to benefit from the collective

knowledge of their peers (Tuan & Nga, 2022). Debates, peer reviews and group revision sessions on the weblogs not only help develop writing skills of the students but also help to cultivate a culture of cooperation and mutual assistance among the students. Different type of writing tasks allow the students to write on different types of subject and in different styles which helps them to understand the writing standard and the way the audience reads the content (Etfita & Wahyuni, 2021).

METHODS AND SAMPLING

This is a qualitative study that investigated the extent to which weblog contributed to the writing skills of secondary school students at a public school in Sabah, Malaysia. To avoid bias in the selection of participants the method of random sampling was employed. In this particular research, the sample comprised of 10 students from Form 2 who were first selected to participate in the interview and reflection activities. After reviewing the responses, it was found that one of the students' answers were unrelated and cannot be included in this research. Therefore, in order to achieve data saturation, the sample was reduced to 9 pupils only.

The study's instrument was an interview question that was open ended. Interviews are very useful for the research to probe into the participants' espoused beliefs and attitudes that cannot be assessed obviously by asking and a questionnaire (Mackey & Gass, 2015). The instruments used for the second research question are adopted from (Perumal & Ajit, 2022) that concerns students' attitude towards the blogs on the improvement of writing skills.

The research aimed to understand how weblogs can enhance students' writing skills through a systematic approach. The process involved examining various sources, technological resources, and real-world examples of using weblogs in educational settings. The second week focused on existing literature and preparing for classroom research, focusing on strategies to integrate weblogs into teaching. The third and fourth weeks were dedicated to data collection, ensuring resources and backup plans were prepared to overcome potential obstacles. The fifth to seventh weeks involved conducting qualitative interviews with students in their classrooms, allowing them to provide detailed accounts of their experiences and perspectives on weblog use. The data was then systematically analyzed, identifying patterns and themes, and drawing conclusions on the efficacy of weblogs in enhancing students' writing abilities. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how weblogs can improve students' writing skills through a rigorous and organized data collection and analysis process.

The study maintained the validity and reliability of its data through a meticulous and thorough research methodology. The use of diverse data collection techniques ensured a precise and dependable understanding of secondary school students' perspectives on using Weblog in writing activities, thereby enhancing the overall quality and credibility of the research.

RESULTS/FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Research Objective 1: Impact of Using Weblog on English Proficiency Among Secondary-level Students

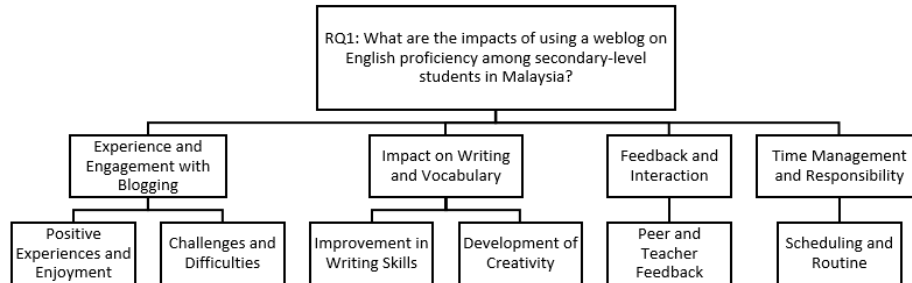


Figure 2 : Themes and Sub-Themes for Impacts of Using Weblog on English Proficiency among Secondary-level Students in Malaysia

Experience and Engagement with Blogging

This captures the essence of students' interactions with the weblog as a learning tool. The responses indicate a predominantly positive experience, characterized by high levels of engagement and enjoyment. Students reported that blogging was not only a fun and creative activity but also a valuable part of their learning process. For instance, Student 1 described the blogging experience as enjoyable and collaborative, emphasizing the teamwork involved: "It was fun because we did a lot of teamwork writing together". Similarly, Student 3 appreciated how blogging helped to keep their mind active and engaged: "I think that blogging helps keep our mind fresh and engaged". This aligns with the findings of Perumal and Ajit (2022), who highlighted the role of digital tools in making learning more enjoyable and engaging for students. According to Yunus et al. (2013), the integration of blogs in the classroom fosters a more interactive and engaging learning environment, which helps maintain student interest and motivation.

Impact on Writing Skills

The primary benefit of blogging for students' writing skills is the opportunity for continuous practice and improvement. The iterative nature of blogging allows students to review and revise their work regularly, which leads to tangible enhancements in their writing capabilities. For instance, Student 1 noted the direct benefits of this practice: "For example I can fix my errors from my previous post in the next post". This iterative process not only helps students correct their mistakes but also strengthens their ability to write with greater precision and clarity. Similarly, Student 9 observed a noticeable increase in their use of advanced vocabulary, attributing this to their blogging experience: "I have started to use more advanced words which I didn't know before". This progression is indicative of how blogging encourages students to expand their lexical repertoire and apply new vocabulary in meaningful contexts (Raya Fitri Sari, 2015).

Development of Creativity

In addition to technical improvements, blogging significantly contributes to the development of students' creative writing skills. Studies such as those by Suadah (2014) and Mabuan (2018) have also highlighted the importance of blogging in fostering creativity among students. The freedom to explore diverse topics and express personal viewpoints allows students to experiment with

different writing styles and genres. This creative liberty is instrumental in cultivating a more nuanced and expressive writing voice. For instance, Student 2's approach to blogging exemplifies this creative freedom. Student 2 noted, "Honestly, I just write whatever comes in mind." This free-flowing style, where ideas are expressed spontaneously, fosters a high degree of creative freedom. By allowing thoughts to flow naturally without rigid constraints, students like she can develop original and inventive content.

Similarly, Student 9 highlighted the dual impact of blogging on writing skills and creativity. She stated, "It enhanced our writing skills and creativity." This perspective underscores how the act of regularly creating content not only hones technical writing abilities but also stimulates creative thinking.

Feedback and Interaction

Students have expressed a strong appreciation for the feedback they receive through blogging, recognizing its crucial role in their learning journey. The process of receiving and acting on feedback is viewed as a significant aspect of their academic development. For example, Student 1 emphasized the benefits of receiving feedback through blogging, stating: "I think it's better receiving feedback through the internet rather than the traditional classroom feedback." Student 1's perspective highlights the importance of constructive feedback in refining her blogging work and enhancing her writing abilities.

Student 2 also reflected on the value of feedback, noting: "The way I improve my blogging skills is by taking feedback seriously and applying it." This shows Student 2's proactive approach to using feedback as a tool for personal growth. By applying feedback, she demonstrates how students can leverage feedback to enhance their blogging skills effectively.

Student 5 further supported this view, sharing: "Feedback is very helpful and encourages me to do better." Student 5's experience illustrates how feedback can boost students' confidence and contribute to their writing improvement. This aligns with the findings of Yunus et al. (2013), feedback in blogging activities enhances students' motivation and engagement, leading to better learning outcomes. This collective emphasis on feedback underscores its role not only in improving individual writing skills but also in fostering a supportive learning community where students can collaborate and learn from one another.

Time Management and Responsibility

Balancing blogging with other academic responsibilities was identified as a major challenge by the students. The need for consistency in blogging was another challenge highlighted by the students. Maintaining a regular blogging schedule requires effective time management skills, which can be difficult for students to develop. This challenge underscores the importance of providing students with guidance on how to manage their time effectively and maintain a consistent blogging routine. This aligned with Suadah (2014), where she mentioned that incorporating structured guidance and time management strategies into blogging activities can help students overcome these challenges and maximize the benefits of blogging.

Research Objective 2: The Perceptions of Students Towards the Use of Weblogs to Enhance Writing Proficiency

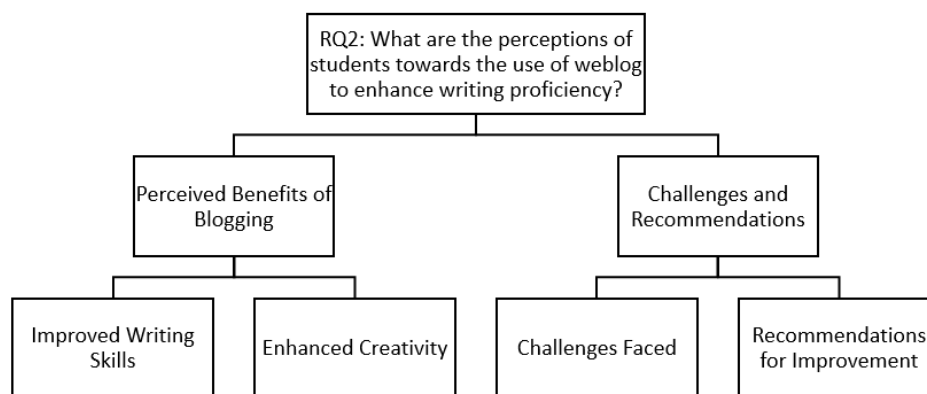


Figure 3: Themes and Sub-Themes for the Perceptions of Students towards the Use of Weblog to Enhance Writing Proficiency.

Perceived Benefits of Blogging

Students have identified several notable benefits of blogging, including enhanced writing skills, increased creativity, and higher motivation. One of the most frequently cited advantages is the improvement in writing skills. Blogging provides students with a regular platform to practice writing in a structured yet creative format. For instance, Student 5 observed, “Blogging improved my writing skills and enhanced my confidence skills”. This statement reflects how blogging serves as an effective medium for students to refine their writing abilities and also their confidence in writing. This finding is supported by Mabuan (2018), who found that students considered blogging a viable medium for enhancing their writing skills despite technological limitations.

In addition to improving writing skills, blogging is seen as a valuable tool for fostering creativity. Students appreciate the freedom blogging offers to explore various topics and express their ideas in imaginative ways. Student 8 highlighted this creative aspect, simply stating, “A creative mind.” This freedom to experiment and innovate is crucial for developing a more engaging and dynamic writing style.

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite the many benefits of blogging, students also identified several challenges and provided constructive recommendations for improving the blogging experience. One major challenge mentioned was time management. Students noted that balancing blogging with other academic responsibilities can be difficult. The need for consistency in blogging was another challenge highlighted. Student 7 pointed out the importance of “Maintaining consistency,” underscoring the struggle to keep up with regular blogging while managing other commitments. Additionally, students experienced initial difficulties in organizing their thoughts effectively, which can hinder the quality of their blog posts.

To address these challenges and enhance the blogging experience, students offered several recommendations. One common suggestion was the use of advanced vocabulary to enrich blog content. This aligned with study by Perumal and Ajit (2022), where they mentioned that addressing these challenges is essential for maximizing the benefits of blogging in educational settings.

Students also called for more structured guidance from teachers to better support their blogging efforts. For example, Student 9 recommended, "Use more blogging to complete assignments and write more in blogs." This suggests that integrating blogging more deeply into regular assignments could provide students with additional practice and reinforce their writing skills. By implementing these recommendations, educators can offer more targeted support and help students overcome the difficulties associated with blogging, ultimately maximizing its benefits. As highlighted by Syaiful (2018), providing structured guidance and support can help students overcome initial difficulties and make the most of blogging as a learning tool.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated that blogging is a powerful tool for enhancing students' writing abilities, providing continuous practice and opportunities for improvement. It also encourages creativity by allowing students to explore a wide range of topics and express their ideas in unique ways. Moreover, the interactive nature of blogging promotes collaborative learning, enabling students to learn from one another and build a supportive community.

The chapter further discussed the implications of the study, noting that weblogs can boost motivation, improve writing skills, and increase student participation in writing activities. It emphasized the importance of incorporating multimedia elements to enrich the learning experience and the need for effective feedback and assessment strategies to fully leverage the benefits of blogging.

Suggestions for future research included expanding the demographic scope to include students from different educational levels and school types, conducting quantitative analyses to complement qualitative findings, exploring teacher perspectives, investigating the long-term effects of blogging on writing proficiency and creativity, and developing strategies to address the challenges of integrating blogs into education.

In summary, this study highlights the potential of weblogs as a valuable educational tool for enhancing writing skills and creating a more engaging and collaborative learning environment. The findings offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers looking to integrate technology into the classroom and point to areas for further research to maximize the benefits of weblogs in education.

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