

EXPRESSING OPINIONS THROUGH BLOG: IDEAS OF THE ESL STUDENTS

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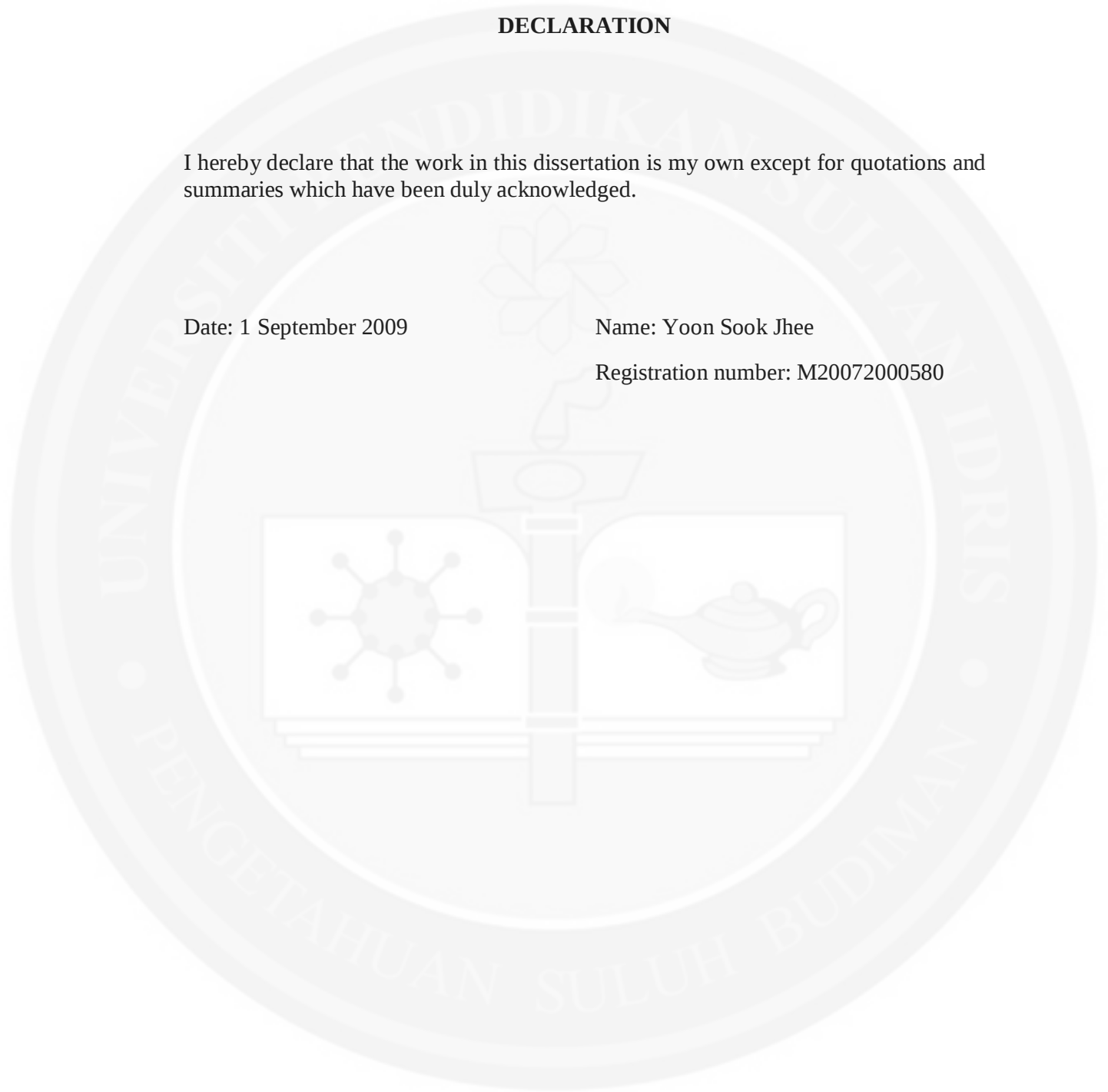
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

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PENGAKUAN

Saya mengaku disertasi ini adalah hasil kerja saya sendiri kecuali nukilan dan ringkasan yang setiap satunya saya jelaskan sumbernya.

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Abstract

This case study aimed at exploring the use of blog in helping ESL student to express ideas. The study investigated the participants' responses, perceptions and feelings while and after engaging in blogging, and providing and receiving comments. A class of 30 ESL students participated in this study. Topics were given every week for eight consecutive weeks. Participants were free to log on to the blogs. Data from the blog content and self assessment rubrics were collected concurrently with the study. At the end of the study, participants answered questionnaire. Semi-structure interviews were conducted. Data were coded with initial coding, followed by focused coding. Data from the four sources were triangulated. Three major themes emerged from the study. Firstly, based on the number of entries, it is found that blogging motivated the majority of the participants to voice out their opinions. Secondly, comments in blogging serve important roles to the participants. Thirdly, participants learned new knowledge and skills through blogging. The findings suggested that blogging could be an effective tool for student teachers to express, share and disseminate ideas on various current issues that could be incorporated in classroom teaching and learning.

Abstrak

Kajian kes in bertujuan untuk memahami penggunaan blog sebagai alat untuk mengemukakan ide-ide di kalangan pelajar yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Kajian berfokuskan respon, persepsi dan perasaan semasa menjalani dua aktiviti utama iaitu menulis blog, dan memberi dan menerima komen. Seramai 30 orang pelajar mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Topik diberi setiap minggu untuk lapan minggu berturut-turut. Mereka bebas untuk melayari blog itu pada bila-bila masa sahaja. Data dari blog dan rubrik dikumpul sejajar dengan permulaan kajian ini. Di akhir kajian pula, mereka menjawab soal selidik dan ditemubual. Data dikodkan dengan pada peringkat awal dan dikodkan sekali lagi menggunakan kod-kod yang lebih fokus. Data dari empat sumber ditriangulasikan. Tiga tema utama muncul dari data-data tersebut. Dengan berpanduan jumlah blog yang telah ditulis, pelajar didapati memberi respon yang positif terhadap penggunaan blog untuk mengemukakan idea. Komen didapati memainkan dua peranan yang penting dalam menggunakan blog untuk mengemukakan idea. Mereka juga didapati telah mempelajari kemahiran dan ilmu pengetahuan yang baru melalui penggunaan blog. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan blog berpotensi menjadi satu alat yang efektif untuk bakal guru mengemuka, berkongsi dan menyebarkan idea tentang pelbagai isu semasa dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



CMC -	Computer-mediated communication
ACMC-	Asynchronous computer-mediated communication
SCMC -	Synchronous computer-mediated communications

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the concept of asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC), particularly weblog or blog. It provides general description of the benefits of incorporating ACMC into education. It also identifies the problem of articulating ideas faced by teachers in teaching and learning. The chapter further explains the purpose of the study, before posing the research questions. It also describes the rationale, significance and limitation of conducting this study. The chapter ends with defining the key words used in describing this study.

1.1 Background of the study

In just seven years, Malaysia has witnessed the growth of 265.63% of Internet users from 3,7000,000 in 2000 to 13,528,200 in 2007 (Internet World Stats, 2008). Furthermore, the same statistics also shows that Malaysia is placed 36th of the 43 countries to have more than 50% of its population in Internet penetration, ahead of countries like Spain, Italy, France and Singapore. These statistics seem to correspond to the continuous growth of World Wide Web which contributes to the emphasis on e-learning.

The characteristics of e-learning are corresponding to the development of World Wide Web. Before the IT bubble which happened between 1998 till 2001, e-learning was a read-only medium (Thompson, 2007). The main objective that e-learning aimed to achieve was the distribution of knowledge to a wide range of audience. The characteristics of the tools as summarised by (Fish, 2007) are inactive, not interactive, expert-driven, naive design, text-heavy, slow and isolated. Although the tools involved are still widely used now, the needs of the students who are digital natives (Prensky, 2001, cited by Fish, 2007) could not be catered anymore.

These digital natives who are continuously engaged in knowledge creation (Fish, 2007) needs more than what e-learning 1.0 could offer. The IT bubble which saw the emergence of Web 2.0 and thus, e-learning 2.0 caters the need their needs. In order to prepare them to be knowledge creators instead of just knowledge workers

(Pink, cited by Fish, 2007), e-learning 2.0 provides read and write medium (Thompson, 2007) for the students. This advancement is best described by Downes (2005) as a transition from merely utilising and spreading information to creating sharing, refining, redefining information before spreading it to other parts of the world. Some of the e-learning 2.0 tools are social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, wiki, blogs, video sharing website such as YouTube and others.

In Malaysia, e-learning is emerging as one of the most important learning aspects to emphasise on teachers, students and stake holders. From learning, teaching, professional development to educational management, e-learning is incorporated and utilised to effectively achieve the National Education Philosophy (<http://www.moe.gov.my/?id=37&lang=en>):

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonic, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large

Specifically, multiple strategies and initiatives have been planned and implemented in schools by government and non-government agencies. These include The Malaysian Smart School, MySchoolNet, equip teachers with ICT knowledge and skills, computerising schools by building computer laboratories, providing ebook,

Penang E-learning Community, Chinese Smart Schools and Private Smart Schools (Chan Foong-Mae, 2002).

In institutions of higher education, initiatives for e-learning are implemented in two phases (Raja Maznah Raja Hussain, 2008). It began by equipping institutions with proper ICT infrastructures. Next, emphasis is given in incorporating e-learning in the teaching and learning process. With Open University, Multimedia University and University of Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) as pioneers in e-learning, other higher institutions could adopt best practices and learn from the challenges faced by these universities.

The integration of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools in education has enabled e-learning to be successfully being implemented. Despite the fact that computer literacy engages online communities in communication, it is important to acknowledge the fact that computer-mediated communication (CMC) differs from the conventional face-to-face communication. Apart from geographical location, the biggest difference is the time element. While face-to-face communication occurs simultaneously in real time, computer mediated communication can occur simultaneously in near real time or not simultaneous. In synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) such as instant messaging, videoconferencing and audioconferencing, all participants are online simultaneously. Asynchronous computer mediated communication (ACMC), on the other hand, such

as email and blog, allows communication without having the participant to be online simultaneously.

The discussion above has surveyed and analysed the different tools available to support CMC in educational setting. The current study specifically focused on the use of blog since blogging has prevailed over other tools in many aspects. Unlike other tools, blog provides comment, access to wider audience and online publishing.

Blog is generally defined as an online individual entry of journals in reverse chronological order in which the blogger consistently includes or posts new journals or entries (Blood, 2000; Mason & Rennie, 2006; The Economist, 2006). Dave Winer, the pioneer to several blogging technologies told The Economist (2006) in an interview that the essence of blogginess lays within the raw, unpolished, authentic and individuality voice of the person who produces the journal.

Although in 1999, only 23 blogs existed (Blood, 2002; Riley, 2005), the growth of blog never stop since then. On the same year, Pitas.com and Blogger.com started to provide web publishing tool and blog hosting service that are user friendly to those with minimal knowledge about computing to create blog in a fast and convenient way (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Other free blog software available are LiveJournal, Wordpress, MSN Spaces, Tripod Blog Builder, and many more. Social networks such as Friendster and Ning.com also provide its user to create their own

blog. Technorati, one of the first blog search engines, reported in its annual publication, State of Blogosphere (2008) that it has indexed 133 millions of blog since 2002.

Utusan Malaysia (2008, April 2) reported that there are more than 133 millions of blog created and maintained by bloggers worldwide. In Malaysia alone, there are approximately 500,000 blogs. The same report also claimed that this statistics positioned Malaysia as the third country with most bloggers, after European Union and Indonesia. Outlining from the features listed above, blogging is seen as a tool that could serve an important role in assisting the students to voice out their opinion.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Previous research has found that Malaysian students are not likely to voice out their opinions in classroom (Sarjit Kaur & Rosy Thiyagarajah, 2000; Noorizah Mohamad Noor, 2006; Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007). From the pedagogical perspective, Malaysian students are used to spoon-feeding style of teaching and learning (Joseph Wong Kee-Kuok, 2004). This has caused students to be unsure of the proper ways to produce quality written work. They are not exposed to opportunities to organise and analyse information and acknowledge authors, thus resulting in plagiarism. Teachers found that students do not have skills needed to support their ideas (Hansford, 2003). Thus, students do not provide enough information to substantiate opinions.

In addition, limited contact time between the teachers and the students does not sufficiently and effectively provide opportunities for students to express themselves. With only two hours per week and 30 students in the class, and four language skills to be taught, the amount of time available for practising target language is very minimal. Furthermore, it is difficult for teacher to pay individual attention to every student. Even in whole class discussion, only a few and normally, the same students would participate. These students dominate the discussion (Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007) while others are just listeners.

The exam-oriented Malaysian students are not trained to be differ. They are very much “by the book” in order to score good grades for written and spoken formal and informal assessments (Noorizah Mohamad Noor, 2006). Students prefer to memorize, rather than analyse critically on the material that they read. They seldom question what is read and written in the textbooks or in other media such as journals and newspapers (Sarjit Kaur & Rosy Thiyagarajah, 2000).

From the student’s perspective, they restrain themselves to express ideas in face to face interaction due to several factors. Firstly, students are shy to participate in classroom (Bahiyah Abdul Hamid, 1992). They believe that expressing opinion might cause embarrassment to themselves (Pilcher, 2003). This is especially true when students give incorrect or unacceptable answers. Students are afraid that it would bring unwanted attraction (Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007). They are reluctant to

differ and justify their opinions as they are afraid to be ridiculed by teacher and peers (Beaven, Calderisi & Tantral, 1998).

Secondly, students are influenced by the cultural background. Students have responsibility to sustain harmonious environment of a learning community (Pilcher, 2003), thus it is inappropriate to disagree or argue in public. Asking question or clarification is not possible as students are expected to be good at perceiving others' opinions. Therefore, students are worried of how others would perceive them if they express opinions (Hansford, 2003). They perceive interrupting others as rude (Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007).

Thirdly, students do not have the language proficiency to articulate themselves. Students who are used to speak in English might need to think many times before they could construct a sentence that could express their ideas (Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007). This is a tiring mental routine for almost every sentence that is constructed. It is also discouraging because by the time the sentence is finally constructed, the teacher might have turned to another student or question. The situation is worsened if they do not get any help from peers and the teacher to find the proper vocabulary, grammar or sentence structure.

Students also do not have broad knowledge to participate in discussion (Zainal Abidin Bin Sayadi, 2007). The lack of reading among the students halts them from

examining issues from multiple angles. Given the fact that teachers have to finish the syllabus according to the time table, there is not much time to expose students to different reading materials. Although language is taught across the curriculum, little emphasis is put to introduce students to current issues. In addition, as future teachers, they need to be aware of the latest development not only in their area of expertise, but also in general knowledge.

Although blogging has been widely used in journalism, a review of literature found that not much empirical evidence could be found in supporting the use of blogging in ESL classrooms. The existing evidence is largely based on context outside Malaysia. Furthermore, to date no research has been done to investigate the possibility of using blog to increase students' opportunities to voice out opinions. Most of the research done focused on using blog to improve writing skills. Therefore, it is important for researcher to examine this line of inquiry in the Malaysian context.

1.3 Rationale of the study

Blogging in the existing literature (Armstrong, Berry & Lamshed, 2004; Flatley, 2005; Jafar Askari Arani, 2005; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Abdullah Kuzu, 2007; Glewa & Bogan, 2007) has shown that this tool is well-received among its users. Although previous research has investigated students' perception in using blog for instructional purposes, the current knowledge and understanding about instructional blogging is till inadequate. Blog, as a tool has not yet been examined thoroughly. Little is known,