

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Students and teachers are chatting it up on web logs – the latest best thing since the overhead projector (Flannery, 2005, p. 32).

What contributes to such a phenomenal reaction towards Web logs among educators and learners in the education world? The quotation above is an exemplification of computer-mediated communication today and how this has greatly affected every sphere of human lives, including the classroom. This is undeniable because the Internet, in particular, is reshaping nearly all aspects of society (Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2001, p. 1).

Over the last decade, there have been a lot of developments on the Internet, giving birth to a system called Web 2.0, through which Internet users can communicate with one another, without having to struggle with the sophistication of Internet programming. By definition, Web 2.0 is “a collection of technologies that create a participatory, common space where multimedia can be shared, discussed, and manipulated with little or no digital programming sophistication” (Caverly, Nicholson, Battle, & Atkins, 2008, p. 34). In simpler terms, this is what is generically known as ‘social networking’. Caverly et al. (2008) postulate that perhaps, the greatest use of this participatory Web 2.0 has been blogs which are mainly concerned with the domain of writing, diaries, and opinions.

Due to the dramatic development of technology, the relevance of the Internet in education is inevitable, and in fact, anticipated. The fundamental principle of progressive education holds true: “21st century skills must be an integral part of teaching and learning of all academic subjects, not add-ons to the curriculum” (Regan, 2008, p. 11). This assertion is supported by the National Center for Educational Statistics which reports that the web is an important resource for teaching and learning (2003, as cited in McPherson, Wang, Hsu, & Tsuei, 2007, p. 25). Technology such as online learning communities is proving to offer a more dynamic learning experience, with direct benefit to students and teachers, and a refreshing change for educators who have struggled with the complexity, cost, and practicality of the last generation of technology tools (Driscoll, 2007, p. 9).

For new millennium teachers, it’s almost impossible to imagine how anyone taught before the World Wide Web (Dayton, 2006, p. 27). This is because today, a majority of university students and educators in the industrialized countries use the Internet to share ideas, conduct research, and collaborate in the production of knowledge (Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2001, cited in Kim, 2008, p. 1343). Obviously, the World Wide Web has changed the traditional thinking about teaching and learning and many students are ready for this shift to multimedia – even enthusiastic. “Students are more comfortable experimenting with technology and visual images because these things are often a regular part of their lives outside of school” (Regan, 2008, p. 12). Thus, the incorporation of technology into the curriculum has the potential to motivate students to engage more actively in the learning process.

The global reach of the World Wide Web helps create connections between many people with diverse opinions and interests. This strength, combined with “the ease of publishing to the web when compared to traditional publishing endeavors, and the ability to reach a large audience have fostered a phenomenon known as weblogs.

(Embrey, 2002, p. 7).

As signified above, Web logs, or blogs in short, i.e. Web pages that serve as publicly accessible journals for individuals (Mercado-Kierkegaard, 2006, p. 128), have exploded on the Internet, allowing anyone worldwide to publish their writings (Weiler, 2003, p. 74). It is unsurprising, therefore, that blogs have become an empowering phenomenon that is described as “the most exciting area of the Internet right now” (Nelson, 2006, p. 4). More people are writing and reading blogs every day, resulting in an “even more rapid content” on the Web than there was before (Clyde, 2002, p. 45).

Blogs are the “in” thing today because they are free, fun, and easy to use. Even those with basic information technology knowledge can post entries and personalize their blogs in seconds. Blogs also facilitate rapid feedback and self-correction (Mercado-Kierkegaard, 2006, p. 128). Anybody with access to the Internet can read blog entries and leave their comments, creating a virtual interactive environment. This interactivity has transformed blogs into powerful learning tools (Karrer, 2007, p. 20; Glogoff, 2007, cited in Kim, 2008, p. 1342).

A small but growing number of educators are starting to buzz with the promise of weblogs in their teaching (Richardson, 2003a, p. 40). Blogs are believed to reinvigorate student engagement and learning, just as other forms of social networking tools. With Really

Simple Syndication (RSS), blogs are a convenient way to spread knowledge and form a specific learning community (Wang, Jeng, Huang, & Wang, 2008, p. 263). Regan (2008, p. 11) posits that blogs allow students of diverse learning styles to engage with ideas, in ways not previously possible.

With respect to pedagogical purposes, three types of blogs have been in use: *the tutor blog*, *the learner blog*, and the *class blog* (Campbell, 2003, as cited in Soares, 2008, p. 518). A class blog requires collaborative effort between teachers and students. It can also become “an extension” of the classroom, allowing on-going discussions (Wang, et al., 2008, p. 263; Clyde, 2005, p. 44; Weiler, 2003, p. 74). This makes class blogs an excellent vehicle for student-centred learning. Also, class blogs provide a lasting record of students’ learning (Richardson, 2003a, p. 40). Holzberg (2003, cited in Clyde, 2005) explicates that:

Classroom blogging has the potential “to motivate students to build online collaboration and enhance learning opportunities.... Blogging provides students with a venue to publish online for and audience and to engage in collaborative activities (if the Web log is set up as a group blog).

(p. 44).

Class blogs are creating opportunities for the exchange of information and ideas to happen beyond the confines of a classroom. All students in a group can easily contribute and edit, and teachers can easily pop in to comment or to monitor students’ progress and contributions (Valenza, 2006, p. 3). This, according to De Almeida Soares (2008, p. 520), makes room for peer correction and feedback. The best thing is that the students know that somebody is reading their work. This is advocated by Kramer (2008, p. 40) who

acknowledges the power of authentic audience. Such blogs also expand instructional time by providing teachers with a user-friendly online format to reinforce strategies, introduce new topics, review important class points, review for tests and provide enrichment (Colombo & Colombo, 2007, p. 12).

The most obvious appeal of blogs in ESL education is that they are rooted in writing. According to Brooks-Young (2005), a tool that relies on the written word and engages students to write outside school definitely has a place in the ESL classroom (p. 10). Class blogs support drafting, feedback, revision, and publication, in ways that traditional paper simply cannot support (Richardson, 2003a). They provide an immediate online audience and consequently giving each writing task a purposeful communicative goal (Campbell, 2003, as cited in Elola & Oskoz, 2008, p. 460; Regan, 2008, p. 12; Valenca, 2006, p. 4) where teachers and students can easily comment on one another's work and share resources.

Blogs present an entirely familiar interface, so that the technology becomes transparent and writing is the focus (Weiler, 2003, p. 74). Furthermore, ESL class blogs allow students (individually, in pairs, or in groups) to upload descriptions of events, reflection, and even photographs (Elola & Oskoz, 2008, p. 455). More importantly, Richardson (2003b, p. 61) maintains that class blogs give more reticent students a chance to enter the conversation and contribute their views.

Along with this recent social phenomenon of blogs over the last decade, "alternative assessment procedures have made consistent inroads into second and foreign language assessment practices" (Ross, 2005, p. 317). This apparent zeitgeist of educational practice

aims to develop on-going learner-centred alternative assessment, where learners can make contributions to the learning process. As such, class blogs can be used as an ideal on-going assessment procedure in ESL learning (Shohamy, 2000, p. 542), as reflected in Sauro (2005):

Second language acquisition and second language (L2) assessment can be reformulated, pushed forward, and reevaluated through technology. In order to do so, it is necessary that the field of applied linguistics “engage more consciously and proactively with the complex language technology reality in which the profession is working” and that technology must not be viewed simply as a tool of efficiency in L2 research and assessment

(pp. 486-487).

This assertion directly addresses the need to inter-relate concepts of alternative and formative assessments which entail: continuous long-term assessment; untimed; free-response format; individualized feedback and washback; open-ended; creative answers; oriented to process; and fosters intrinsic motivation (Brown, 2004, p. 13). These aspects are essential in measuring students’ progress, providing assistance, and developing students’ autonomy and motivation. Class blogs, in particular, are potentially very useful in formative assessments because:

Students can work together to produce and edit collaborative texts, since all members of a class blog are given permission to write and manage posts.... This makes room for peer-correction and feedback, which are highly important in the development of critical reading and writing skills.

(Soares, 2008, p. 320).

Clearly, teacher and peer feedback is indispensable to monitoring assessment accuracy, parallel to Nation’s nineteenth principle of language teaching, that is “*learners should*

receive helpful feedback which will allow them to improve the quality of their language use” (1996, p. 34). This is what is referred to as beneficial washback, which is achieved when students are motivated to transform assessment into a learning experience (Brown, 2004, p. 63). This is apparently the focus of ‘assessment of learning’. The approach of ‘assessment for learning’ strongly advocates that learners should utilize the assessment as a learning tool; a method that is believed to enable learners to enhance their strengths and address their weaknesses. Ultimately, this approach aims to produce intrinsically motivated learners. Motivation, in general, is important as it leads to successful language learning outcomes (Midraj, Midraj, O’Neill, & Sellami, n.d. p. 45). This can be made possible through the integration of class blogs as a form of assessment, as students are willing to engage in an activity that is inherently enjoyable; lessening the intimidating feelings they harbour towards language assessment. It is evident, therefore, that ESL learning and assessment should interact in a cyclical manner. Thus, this interactive assessment tool, i.e. class blogs, will most likely motivate students to improve their ESL learning performance.

1.1 Background of the Study

Alternative assessments aim to provide more “flexible methods for recognizing what their students know and are capable of doing” (Kieffer & Faust, 1996, p. 152). As such, ESL education in Malaysia has started acknowledging the potential of alternative assessments, which is evident in the inclusion of continuous assessments (such as PAFA, PEKA, etc), apart from the typical summative final examinations.

From among different possible alternatives has emerged formative assessment, which regards the goal of assessment as an index to learning processes. “The current appeal of

formative assessment thus is grounded in substantive empirical research and has exerted an expanding radius of influence in educational assessment” (2005, p. 318). In addition, alternative and formative assessments also encourage self- and peer-assessments, which have proven to be ideal tools for the development of learner autonomy and on-going performance. In Malaysia, however, these aspects are not well-integrated yet in many ESL courses, which essentially focus merely on the teachers’ evaluation and feedback. It is this setting that triggers the desire to investigate the possibility of integrating the currently two equally powerful phenomena, i.e. blogs and alternative assessment, in ESL education.

Class blogs satisfy the importance of writing for an audience. Most students typically take more care with their work when they have an audience (Brooks-Young, 2005, p. 11). However, given the constraints of a traditional classroom, this learning environment has been very difficult to achieve. This makes class blogs a potentially ideal tool in assessing and giving feedback to students in ESL courses in tertiary levels. Nonetheless, blogging is obviously a relatively recent media in the ESL world. The literature on blogging in the classroom, thus, is less developed than that examining other learning tools (Ellison & Wu, 2008, p. 106) and little analysis has been done on the quality of blogs as a classroom tool (Borja, 2005, p. 17). Also, it is likely many would assume that such a recent media would not be able to be well utilized as a language learning, what more assessment tool. Although not much research has been carried out to specifically prove the possibility of using class blogs for assessment, the above discussion provides sufficient evidence that class blogs could be the ideal tool to materialize the aim of ‘assessment for learning’.

The few recent researches on blogs and education yield contradictory results. Some studies (Lin et al., 2006) have revealed that blogs successfully contribute to students’ online

engagement. On the contrary, others have claimed that blog technology has failed to motivate students to become involved in the online activity (Kim, 2008, p. 1342). Thus, it is the aim of this research to add-on to this on-going investigation on the relevance of integrating class blogs as an alternative form of assessment, particularly in Malaysian universities.

The relevance of the findings of this research will be discussed according to the Humanistic theory of language learning. This is because all aspects discussed above are parallel to Carl Rogers' Humanistic approach to language learning, which focuses on "learning" rather than "teaching" (Brown, 1994, pp. 85-7), as the basic foundation and goals of language assessments. According to this theory,

Kids are looking for opportunities for self-expression and to find their own identities.... It's part of a broader trend in which kids are taking control of the media they use.... More and more are becoming producers of information rather than passive consumers of it.

(Oatman, 2005, p. 37).

The Humanistic theory of language learning also believes that learning will be more effective when students have wholesome relationships with classmates (Stevick, 1982, p. 13) through non-threatening methods of assessment (Grierson, 1995, p. 216). All of these are parallel to the very nature of class blogs which acknowledges learners' development of self-identities, active participation, and interactive and collaborative writing among bloggers; all done on a familiar technological media platform. Teachers who have been using the humanistic approach in teaching discovered that their students have become more motivated to participate in the classroom (Stevick, 1982, p. 31). This justifies why the Humanistic approach forms the basic theoretical framework of this research.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Motivational factors have always been a building block in fulfilling the objectives of ESL courses (Brown, 1994, p. 152). Typical assessment procedures are not only considered boring by many, but also intimidating (Hunt, Neill, and Barnes, 2006). Most assessment procedures require students to write on papers and this is definitely not a plus-point since most students do not enjoy writing (Borja, 2005, p. 17). This does not only de-motivate the students but push them to commit the sin of rote-learning, thus producing passive learners (Kuzu, 2007, p. 36). In Malaysia, particularly, this is a result of and results in the exam-oriented education system. This vicious cycle leads many parents to complain that tests have become an end rather than a means” (Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, 2004).

Most feedback provided in ESL learning is clearly insufficient, disabling ESL learners from enhancing their strengths and addressing their weaknesses. Existing ways of assessing and giving feedback are very much limited to the classroom time and space (Kuzu, 2007, p. 36). Malaysian Minister of Education, Dato’ Sri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein (2004), pointed out that we must have more enlightened assessment to replace the overly exam-oriented education system. Thus, a new assessment tool that is fun and meaningful is needed. The recent ‘blogomania’ brings about the question whether blogs can be used as the new-age assessment and feedback tools in ESL courses to address Malaysian ESL learners’ motivational problems.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of Malaysian university students and educators regarding the use of class blogs in assessing students' performance in ESL courses, as well as giving feedback to the students' blog entries. It is the objective of this study is to use the findings to provide evidence for the feasibility of using class blogs as an alternative form of assessment and giving feedback in Malaysian ESL courses, based on Carl Rogers' Humanistic approach to language learning. This study also aims to encourage Malaysian ESL educators and curriculum or syllabus developers to consider incorporating class blogs as a tool to assess and provide feedback to students' English language performance in future ESL courses.

1.4 The Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, two specific research questions have been formulated to guide this investigation:

1. How do Malaysian university students perceive the use of class blogs as assessment tools in ESL courses?
2. How do Malaysian university educators perceive the use of class blogs as assessment tools in ESL courses and its potential of use in giving feedbacks to students?

These are the questions that essentially guided the literature that is reviewed in the following chapter, which had subsequently assisted in determining the study's theoretical framework. Also, the research questions act as a point of reference in determining the research instruments and data processing methods which are most appropriate to this study.

1.5 The Scope of the Study

This study is subject to a number of demarcations. First, in terms of setting, this study's scope is only within the ESL educators and students in Malaysia. This focused scope ensures that the research questions are addressed. Also, it specifically addresses the dire needs of Malaysian ESL educators to re-think and re-evaluate their current teaching and assessment methods. Thus, the findings gathered from this study will be discussed specifically according to the current educational issues and developments relevant to the Malaysian setting.

Second, in terms of participants, this study limits its investigation to only Malaysian ESL university educators and students. This means that the data of this study, i.e. the perceptions on the use of class blogs as an alternative form of assessment, will only be collected from Malaysian university ESL educators and students. This is because, in Malaysia, only educators and curriculum developers at the tertiary level have more freedom in the choice of assessments in the ESL courses. Educators in Malaysian schools are very much tied down by what has already been determined by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Thus, this may limit them from integrating an altogether new form of alternative assessment, such as the incorporation of class blogs.

In addition, only class blogs will be the focus of this study. Despite the emergence of many types of blogs that fit into pedagogical purposes, this study will only revolve around gathering data on the feasibility of using class blogs in ESL courses, given its practicality, on the part of educators, and its more collaborative nature. This will be further exemplified in the ensuing literature review section.

In terms of assessment forms, the scope of this study will be focused within the objective of ‘assessment for learning’. Thus, only relevant issues of interest will be covered for discussion in the subsequent literature review and the analysis of data, such as *feedback*, *alternative assessment*, *formative assessment*, *self-assessment*, and *peer-assessment*.

Lastly, this study will only be limited to the participants’ perceptions. Although in comparison, a study that ‘proves’ something may be better valued, this issue by itself is relatively new. Previous research is insufficient to indicate that there have been any Malaysian educators who have tried using class blogs in ESL courses. Words of mouth are the only evidence that this alternative form of assessment has started to be used by a small but growing number of educators in a number of ESL courses in Malaysian universities. This clearly makes it difficult to generalize the efficacy of using class blogs in assessing and giving feedback in ESL courses. The perceptions of Malaysian ESL university educators and students, therefore, are needed first. This can be used as the basis to develop bigger-scale research to prove the proposed idea’s efficacy.

1.6 The Limitations of the Study

The inevitable limitations of this study may result from a number of factors, as follows:

1. If longer period of investigation was possible, perhaps a larger sample could be used through questionnaires to better verify the participants’ perceptions regarding the research issue. This limitation is addressed through the in-depth interviews conducted with selected Malaysian ESL university educators in both public and private institutions.

2. Since only a small number of educators in a few universities have started using class blogs as a form of assessment, it is difficult to select participants from all tertiary institutions in Malaysia. Given this circumstance and the small-scale nature of this study, groups of participants who have been using class blogs in their ESL courses are standardized to only one tertiary institution.

Nonetheless, these practical aspects, that need to be taken into account, are not at the expense of the study's validity and reliability.

1.7 The Significance of the Study

This study is clearly of relevance in today's technological era. The use of this new media in ESL education might be one of the alternatives to the current intimidating traditional language assessment methods. The findings from this study would reveal whether this is the case in the Malaysian settings. This study will be relevant particularly to ESL educators and curriculum or syllabus developers, especially those who are seeking better ways to assess and improve students' language performance and skills through the use of information technology. It will also be of relevance to ESL educators who have been searching for ways to improve second language learners' motivation to learn and practise English through assessment and simultaneously use assessment for instructional purposes.

The findings will provide evidence which can assist ESL practitioners to consider incorporating class blogs as a form of assessment in ESL courses. Furthermore, the findings of this study can contribute towards the existing body of literature in the field of alternative ESL assessment worldwide and in Malaysia. The findings will also add to the

rather insufficient amount of research related to the efficacy of using information technology in ESL teaching, learning, and assessment. Further, the findings can be used by other researchers and educators who believe and have an invested interest in Humanistic language education. Overall, the findings would be insightful enough to be incorporated as another new addition into the existing ESL research discoveries.

1.8 Definition of Terms

Blogs

A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world. Your blog is whatever you want it to be.

(Blogger, 2009)

The Webopedia (2005), however, defines blogs as “a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual” (Mercado-Kierkegaard, 2006, p. 128). Blog entries, or “posts”, are also listed in reverse-chronological order (Nelson, 2006, p. 3) and are automatically date- and time-stamped (Oatman, 2005, p. 37). Evan Williams, the founder and creator of Blogger, describes Blog posts as instant messages to the Web (Richardson, 2003b, p. 63). Blogs are characterized by the following:

- intended for general public consumption;
- allow readers to enter their own comments to individual posts;
- filled with hyperlinks to other Internet sites and link generously, allowing readers to follow conversations between Weblogs;
- are serial;

- allow for the inclusion of audio-video files and other multimedia formats;
- The style is informal and personal;
- are like a short public lecture.

(Mercado-Kierkegaard, 2006, p. 128, Drezner & Farrell, 2004, p. 32; Gomez, 2005, p. 3; Richardson, 2003a, p. 42; Flannery, 2005, p. 32; Embrey, 2002, p. 7).

Bloggers

Individuals who create and maintain blogs are known as ‘bloggers’ (Gomez, 2005, p. 3). The owner of a blog shares content in the form of text, digits, symbols, graphics, or audio/video (Lin & Yuan, 2006, p. 40).

Blogging

The activity of updating a blog, i.e. the act of creating a blog and adding entries to an online journal or commenting on them (Oatman, 2005, p. 37).

Blogosphere

Blogs and their links, i.e. global network of blog postings, form an interconnected whole or the intellectual cyberspace which bloggers occupy called the “blogosphere”, formed from the Greek word “logos” (word) (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008, p. 1994). It also refers to the connected realm of blogs that exists on the Internet and is accessible via links to other blogs, specialty search engines, and blog indexes (Embrey, 2002, p. 7). The blogosphere is playing an increasing role in establishing trends, reporting news and opinion and generating buzz (Nelson, 2006, p. 3).

Class Blogs

The class blog is a joint effort between students and teacher. It may therefore be seen as a way to foster a feeling of community between the members of a class (Campbell, 2003). This is especially true if learners are involved and sharing information about themselves and their interests as well as responding to what others are writing (De Almeida Soares, 2008, p. 520). According to Bella (2005) and to McDowell (2004), class blogs can be used as discussion boards. If a discussion ends due to time, the students who have not had the chance to contribute or who are reticent to participate can join in on the conversation in the blog by writing comments or replying to existing ones (De Almeida Soares, 2008, p. 520).

Assessment

Assessments and Tests are not synonymous. Tests are “prepared administrative procedures that occur at identifiable times in a curriculum when learners muster all their faculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated” (Brown, 2004, p. 4). Assessment, on the other hand, is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. A good teacher never ceases to assess students, whether those assessments are incidental or intended. Assessments are, therefore, a subset of teaching, and tests are a subset of assessment.

Alternative assessment

Alternative assessment consists of any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is an alternative to traditional forms of testing (O’Malley & Pierce, 1996). Alternative assessment is criterion-referenced, by definition, and is typically authentic because it is based on activities that represent real-life settings. It is intended to measure complex intellectual capabilities that focus on important and teachable learning process (Gredler, 1995, p. 431).

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is that part of assessment carried out by learners which involves learners discovering what they know, what they feel, and what they can do. This practice has been proven to be advantageous to both learners and teachers (Cohen, 1994, as cited in Cram, 1995, p. 271). The procedure involves students judging their own learning, especially their performance (Yuh-Mei, 2008, p. 235). Self assessment derives its theoretical justification from a number of well-established principles of second language acquisition such as autonomy that is claimed to develop learners' intrinsic motivation (Brown, 2004, p. 270).

Peer-assessment

Peer assessment appeals to similar principles as self-assessment, the most obvious of which is cooperative learning. Peer assessment is simply one arm of a plethora of tasks and procedures within the domain of learner-centred and collaborative education (Brown, 2004, p. 270).

1.9 Summary

Today's technology is developing at an astronomical rate. The explosion of blogs on the Web sparks the idea on their potential of use as language teaching, learning, and assessment tools in. The easy, fun, and interactive features of class blogs can promote ESL students' motivation and thus be used as a collaborative alternative assessment tool in Malaysian ESL courses on tertiary levels. Also, the fact that blogs allow people to post comments is a plus-point that may provide a more efficient and less intimidating platform for ESL educators to provide feedback. This feature also may allow both educators and learners to reap the benefits of self- and peer-assessments.