E-Learning Environment: Blogging as a Platform for Language Learning

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Abstract
E-learning or Web-based learning environment is an evolution in education and English language learning. The interactivity in e-learning environment today has changed the “lonely” e-learning mode to one learning platform that enables learners to interact not only with the learning materials but also with other learners. The interactions in e-learning can be categorized in three different levels of interactions. They are conceptualization (interacting with concepts), constructions (interacting with tasks) and dialogue (interacting with people). The interactions in e-learning create an e-social learning environment. This environment may have an impact on the learners’ English language learning and language literacy. This paper examines the impact of interactions in e-learning environment towards English language learning and language literacy among undergraduate learners. In order to do that, blogs was used as a platform for interaction among learners. This study found that there are different levels of learning activities taken place during blogging that encouraged learners to interact with each other using different language learning skills and language patterns. The role of e-social environment in developing the learners’ confidence in using English is also noticeable.

Keywords: CALL, Blogs, e-learning environment, writing, ESL, computer-based learning environment

1. Introduction
Learning ESL has always been very challenging especially for low proficiency students since most of them are less motivated to learn the language due to the less interesting and interactive learning environment (Lightbown and Spana, 1999). To solve this problem, many teaching approaches have been applied to help students to be more motivated to learn the language. One of the latest approaches is by integrating technology in the classroom. This approach combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology which can add value to the teaching and learning of language skills. Furthermore, e-learning environment can be motivating, interactive, autonomous and time saving.

One of the ways to create an e-learning environment which involves the language skills needed by learners is by using blogs. Blogs or also known as weblogs, or online journal (personal journal) and recently as collaborative technology is a new approach for individuals to express and share their thoughts with the public. This novel way of writing has become popular among internet users. Most blog writers use this environment for self-expression and self-empowerment as writing in blogs makes people become more thoughtful and more critical in their writing (Blood, 2002). Currently, blogging is slowly making an impression in the teaching and learning environment whereby many educators
consider blog as an important writing tool since “it occupies a prominent role in pedagogical model that stresses the importance of self-reflection and the process of students taking control of their own destiny” (Brown, 2004: 260). Additionally, blog is a log of one’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, assessments, ideas, or progress towards goals, usually written with little attention to structure, form, or corrections (Brown, 2004). This feature of blogging allows learners the freedom to write freely and further enjoy their writing.

Many studies done, revealed the advantages of using e-learning in ESL classroom, such as blog can promote exploration of English websites (Campbell, 2004), communicate / interact with the cyberspace community (Campbell, 2004), collaborative learning and empower leaners to become more analytical and critical (Oravec, 2002). In Malaysia, a study done by Nadzrah (2007 & 2008) indicated that learners use English language constructively when interacting online using blog, such as doing discussions, giving opinion and writing. The online writing gave the learners an authentic and enjoyable learning enviroment.

2. Writing on Blogs

Writing, on the other hand places more demands on both teachers and learners, which requires a conducive environment that allows learners to enjoy writing. One of the way to create an e-learning environment that induces the learning of writing is e-writing using journal or blogs. Using ‘blog’ as one of the writing activity was found encouraging and further enhancing learners writing and thinking skills (Nadzrah, 2007). Many educators consider blog writing or journal writing as an important writing tool because ‘journals occupy a prominent role in pedagogical model that stresses the importance of self-reflection and the process of learners taking control of their own destiny” (Brown, 2004: 260). This is also because a journal or blog is a log (or “account”) of one’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, assessments, ideas, or progress towards goals, usually written with little attention to structure, form, or corrections (Brown, 2004) that may allow learners to write freely and to enjoy their writing.

There are many advantages of using blogs as a writing tool. According to Godwin-Jones (Godwin-Jones, 2006) writing on blogs:

- Encourages feedback and represents both writing and reading activities;
- Stimulates debate, critical analysis, and encourages articulation of ideas and opinion;
- Offers opportunities for collaborative learning; projects, debates or interactive travel logs;
- Provides environment in which learners can develop skills of persuasion and argumentation;
- Creates a more student-centered learning environment
- Offers informal language reading.

3. Blogs as a Language Learning Tool

The application of blogs as a learning tool has opened a new way for an online constructive learning as blogs provide more opportunities for learners to construct their own learning actively (Seitzinger, 2006). Besides, constructivist learning encourages learners for useful and meaningful learning that develops through active, manipulative, constructive and reflective learning. In addition the constructive learning is also be intentional, authentic, challenging, and cooperative, collaborative, and conversational. In a classroom environment, students create their own meanings and develop ideas through interaction with peers and teachers that creates an environment to use and construct the language and new knowledge in different situation (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Therefore, blogs as a tool for language learning can provide learners a constructive and conducive language learning environment.
Since blogs enable bloggers to give comments and feedback to the writer, or even to hold class discussion in chronological order, it benefits the learners in many ways. For example, blogging as a tool for discussion groups can be an effective tool for language learning, as it is the right tool for learners to express themselves (Davi, Frydenberg, & Gulati, 2007), as it encourages learners to write more thoughtfully (Flatley, 2005) and critically (Nadzrah Abu Bakar & Ismail, 2009) by requiring students to “carefully formulate and stand by one’s opinion” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Besides, blogging also may develop critical thinking skills. Oravec (2002) noticed that when learners write on the blogs, they must carefully evaluate and monitor their writing because the writing is available to public, and this processes will develop their critical thinking.

However, there are many questions that need to be answered. In Malaysia, for example, blogs are used widely including in education. How far can blog help learners of English language benefit from it? What are the language activities that facilitate learning? What are the types of writing used by learners when writing on blogs? What factors that influence the type of writing used? How is language learning take place? These are some of the questions that need to answered in order to understand how e-writing using blog can be one of the powerful tool to encourage learners to write.

4. Research Design
The focus of the study described in this article is the potential of blog technology for encouraging language learning through the online interaction between learners, as well as in developing their writing and language skills. This study was based on a project work in an integrated project work component in an English class. The integrated project work was a combination of face-to-face and online discussion. The face-to-face discussion was group discussion and oral presentation done by the learners at the end of the semester. The online discussion was the group discussion done on blogs.

4.1. Research Objective
The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of interactions in e-learning environment towards language learning and language literacy among undergraduate learners. In order to achieve the objective of this study, these research questions were incorporated:

a. What are the language activities on blogs that facilitate English as second language learning?
b. How English language learning takes place while blogging?

4.2. Participants
The participants were the first year tertiary learners enrolled in English for Social Sciences which they had to take as one of the compulsory course in their degree. This course lasted for one semester. The participants had taken MUET (Malaysian University English Test) before they entered university as one of the language test requirement. Most participants were in the band 3 and 4 of the MUET band. They were considered under the competent user and modest user of English language. The participants were familiar with ICT and have been using Internet for many purposes, such as for searching information, e-mail, chatting and others. These participants were from the group age of 19 to 25 years of age.

4.3. Background to the Research
English for Social Sciences is a compulsory English course for all undergraduates from the Faculty of Social Sciences. This course focuses on reading academic text in order to equip the first year students with relevant skills in English that will enable them to cope with their academic demands, such as reading skills, speaking skills, and writing skills. Writing skills, on the other hand, is as important as reading skills. However, the time for writing in the class is considered not enough by the learners and instructors. This is because they have only one semester to learn English, and the class runs only for 4
hours per week for 14 weeks, thus longer time is needed for learners to practice their writing skills that
can not be done in the regular class hour. In order to provide sufficient practices for writing, online
writing that is using blogs is introduced. The learners participate on blogs outside the class hour and
during their free time. There is no restricted or specific time that they need to participate.

4.4. Method

Table 1 shows the framework of blogs activities carried out in the classroom.

Table 1: The framework of the blogs activity

Blogs activity was a section of a course integrated learning activity that combines both face-to-
face learning environment and online learning environment. The purpose of integrated activities was to
give learners more usage of English language in different learning environment. The activities were
divided into several stages: face-to-face discussion, online discussion (blogs), group presentation and
project report (written). The face-to-face activities started from the early stage, and the online activities
started in the second stage after the learners had completed the first stage successfully. At the
beginning of the study, learners were divided into groups. The group members were their classmates
where they were given the liberty to choose their own group members. It was easier for learners to
discuss the project work if they were among familiar friends. During the first week of the project,
learners were given a choice to either use suggested topics from the course file or to choose any topic
related to social sciences area for their project topic. After they had decided on the topic, they were
required to produce questions to be discussed on blogs. The learners then created their group blogs and
participated on the blogs. Each student in the group discussed the questions posted and other questions
related to the project work on blogs. Below is the sample of the topic and questions of the project
selected by a group of learners (G4):

**Topic:** Foreign workers

**Title:** Illegal immigrants: Is there room for them in our land?

**Objective:** To understand the position of illegal immigrants in Malaysia.

**Research Questions:**
1. What is the definition of illegal immigrants?
2. What are the effects that our society is going to face if floods of illegal immigrants enter our country every year?
3. Why do illegal immigrants choose Malaysia?
4. What are the problems faced by illegal immigrants?

The discussion on the blogs lasted until they finished discussing the questions and came up with a solution. At the end of the semester, learners were given a set of questionnaire to answer. The questionnaire was used for the purpose of investigating the learners’ opinion on how far activities on blogs might help them in developing their language skills and writing skills. Then their blogs were collected in order to identify the types of language used by the learners while they participated on the blogs. Lastly, the questionnaires were distributed at the end of the semester.

5. Findings and Discussions
This section discusses on the findings based on the research questions. The learners in this study produced a total of 10 blogs from 10 groups of 4 learners. Each learner was compulsory to participate on the blog discussions that lasted for 12 weeks (1 semester).

5.1. Language Activities on Blogs that Facilitate Language Learning
We used constructivism theory in looking at the learning activities and the language learning gained by the learners. It is a theory about knowledge and learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). It was found that the learning activities on blogs motivated the learners to learn the language constructively through the construction of knowledge. The blogging activities were set up for learners to explore information, to solve problems and to promote new pattern of thinking. It opens an opportunity for learners to experience the personal creation of knowledge by realizing the learning that was taking place during the blogging activities. Not only that the learners were able to learn the language constructively but they were able to build up their sense of autonomy, especially when they were given the opportunity to construct their own path to solve the problems.

Language learning activities done by learners on blogs can be categorized in three stages. They are creating a problem, creating and building up a blog, and on blog discussion (blogging). At the first stage of blogging, the students needed to create a problem that later needed to be solved during the activity. Creating a problem needs students to think critically and beyond their knowledge, because the problems they created during this stage need to be answered through research and discussion on their blogs. By doing this, the learners are not only able to practice their critical thinking but also to practice their language in an authentic environment. They were not forced to choose the topic but they were given a freedom to pick the topic that interests the whole group. The autonomy that was given to the learners helped them to build their self confidence and self responsibility in their journey to complete the task. This is because not only the learners were interested to the topic but they were also interested to find the answers to the problem they had created.

In the second stage, students had to register the group blog and started to build up the blogs. Some learners were not familiar with blogs or blogging, as this activity was their first time blogging. For these learners they learnt to create and build up their blogs with the help of their friends and also by trial and error.

The last stage is the discussion on blogs. During discussion, the learners need to answer all questions posted on the blogs. Each student must participate by giving ideas, opinions or by discussing citations taken from their readings. These activities also open an opportunity for these learners to compete with each other, in terms of new knowledge they brought in during the discussion on blogs. This type of language learning was found to be more constructive compared to only face-to-face learning environment. Furthermore, the students were found to be more comfortable giving their opinion online than face-to-face. According to some of them, the online discussion environment gave them the opportunity to think and compose their opinion as they have unlimited time to do that online. This opportunity gave them a chance to learn the language indirectly. For instance when they wrote on the blogs for discussion, they were able to correct any language errors, such as grammar, sentence
structure or spelling, and they were also able to change their opinion that might be irrelevant to the topic discussed before posting. The face-to-face learning environment does not give learners this opportunity and in which the learning might be limited.

5.2. Writing Skills

Learners’ responses to the writing section were positive. It is worth noting the learners’ reactions to the learning that took place while they blogged. Through an examination of these data, it is possible to understand the students’ reaction towards writing on blogs.

Some learners pointed the long-term advantages of writing on blogs, such as it increased their writing skills because they were exposed to different types of writing that influenced their writing style.

I found out that my writing skills is rapidly increase after writing on the blog, I have to read at least five different articles on what we are suppose to write. I’ve been exposed to different type of way to write and it really improves my skill. .... I have to keep writing and I think it’s good since my skills are not going to deteriorate. (S9)

Blogs is also a platform where learners could express themselves, in terms of ideas and opinion. On top of that, the learners revealed the positive impact that they experienced when writing on the blog, such as improving in the sentence length, sentence structure, and creativity in writing.

In terms of language skills, I have always been a good writer. So, it was ok for me to write freely and express my opinions in the right manner. But after using the blog as a mode of expressing my ideas and opinions, it has somewhat improved my writing skills. As in sentence length, I found it easy to write long sentences because I had many ideas to express. My sentence structure and creativity were also improved because I spent time reading other blogs to gain more ideas and different ways of expressing ideas. (S25)

There are also times when students need a new writing environment which are more relax and informal, and not restricted to writing rules. This kind of environment (blogging) was found interesting as the learners can be themselves when writing.

Using blogs for learning purposes amuse me more because it is not too boring and I can always find something new to do with the blog. Writing in blogs is more relax and rather informal. So I don’t feel very restricted to rules when writing. As for creativity I use emoticons to brighten up the blog a bit. (S3)

Besides that, using blogs as a writing platform also increased the learners’ interest in writing. They were more motivated to write as they have the sense of freedom when blogging.

Honestly I dislike writing so much but with blogs, I started to improve my writing a lot and be creative when I’m writing, using a lot of vocabulary I that I learnt (from the readings). (S10)

It (blogging) helps me to write better than before. It is because on blogs I can write anything I want without need to think carefully. I just write from my heart. (S1)

In addition, writing on blog gave learners opportunity to self-improvement. While they were blogging there is a space for them to learn the language on their own and to monitor their language progress.

In the three month after using the blogs my sentence structure, creativity, is better before using the blog. May be I have done a lot of reading and looking at my friends’ sentences who are better than me. (S31)

... I have to control the sentence length, make sure it is not very long. Besides that, I have to arrange the sentence structure to make sure my group member can read it easily and clearly. (S33)

Furthermore, the learning environment in blogs provided an opportunity for other bloggers outside the group to give comment, and some of the remarks assisted learners to improve their writing
and their discussion points. In fact, it encouraged learners to be more alert of the mistakes they made in their writing or of the interesting points they had discussed.

*I can say that my sentence length has improved as I read a lot of articles and also the comments in the blogs given by others...* (S26)

### 5.3. Reading Skills

Besides that, another learning that took place before the learners could write their opinions on the blogs was reading skills. They were required to read any articles in English that were related to the topic they had chosen. This activity not only provides learners with new knowledge from the reading content but also it gives them the facility to practice their reading skills, such as scanning, paraphrasing, note-taking and also critical thinking. As the discussion continued, the questions discussed became more detailed, and there was a need for learners to go into in-depth reading that encompassing not only understanding of the text but also extracting important points from the reading texts for the discussion purposes. Whatever the nature of reading, an opportunity for language learning takes place when the learners encounter something that appears different or interesting, such as new vocabulary, new ideas/argument or new sentence structure and also that require them to perform critical thinking. One of the students (S2) indicated:

*I guess that I clearly need to think critically. At first I need to prepare the draft before elaborate my idea. Then I separate the idea with these questions: what? How? When? And who? And added the example. So I can think what I should do with my idea.* (S2)

Another student (S8) said that:

*From blogs, it had improved my sentence length and sentence structure through the reading while searching for information. Reading had improved my creativity in writing and giving opinion. I think it is a good way to improve my writing skills* (S8)

Reading activity in this study was considered as one of the most important learning processes the learners needed to experience. Each student was required to read at least three reading articles related to their project topic. The exposure to reading different types of articles promoted/opened a space for learners to discover and to construct their understanding of the text, and consequently they acquired the reading skills unconsciously and autonomously.

### 5.4. Critical Thinking Skills

The survey also required students to express their opinion regarding the development of their critical thinking skills while doing the blog project. Most of them indicated that the activity helped them to develop their critical thinking skills. In fact, they pointed out that they required to think critically not only to the questions on the blogs but also to the reading materials before they participated in the discussion, in which they hardly did when reading before participating in this project. S20 indicated that she realized she think critically while arguing and discussing the points given by the group members.

*S20 – ...I do think I can think critically. Discussion on blog enables us to discuss and argue about points that have been brought up in the blog. In order to get the most accurate point or argument, I have to think critically so that the outcome is the best answer that we can give to our question.*

The questions posted on the blog also played an important role for the development of critical thinking. Some questions demanded learners’ deep understanding of the topic that required them to read other related information. It was found that learners were more motivated to participate in the discussion when they found questions were very challenging and needed them to do some research and went through few reading processes before they could participate in the discussion. Understanding the reading content involves scanning, skimming, predicting content, and understanding the text critically, and thus this leads the learners to critical thinking. S22 and S23 said that
S22 – Thinking skills? My group discussion is about illegal immigrants. This topic is so hard for me. It makes me think critically and I am able to do that. To make me more understand the topic, I do some research through internet and read news. After that I come out with my own views.

S23- when I wrote on the blog, I need to think critically. Because my blog issue is pretty serious. I must think maturely and seriously to give my opinion. I have to read more information that I discussed in blog from other resources.

S25 stressed that the opportunity for expressing their opinion in the blog encouraged her to think critically.

S25 –In the three months I have been blogging, I can clearly and confidently say that my critical thinking have been improved after blogging because we tend to think and express our opinions in a good and strong manner when we think critically.

The learners critical thinking increased when they were able to express their opinion on the subject discussed by using evidence they obtained from the reading to support their opinion. Thus it increased their level of confidence in expressing themselves online.

However, two learners indicated that their critical thinking skills were not developed while doing blogging activities because they only cut and paste the information from the reading and did not discussed or looked into it in detail. Besides that, S1 stressed that she needed someone to motivate or push her to write and for her to think critically. Since this activity needed learners to be autonomous, she was not capable to develop her critical thinking on her own. Guidance from teacher and peers is definitely needed for this category of student.

5.5. Online Interaction/Discussion

The online interactions investigated involved the learners’ opinion on their ability to participate in an online discussion. A review of students’ posting on blogs revealed that there was series of significant discussions. At the earlier stage, the contribution of ideas posted were brief, simple, less argument and less opinion giving than contributions posted at the end of the semester. In fact, the learners tend to copy and paste the information from the reading texts instead of discussing the information due to lack of confidence in the language. Furthermore at the beginning, the length of discussions was short, and the sentence structures were simple. However, the improvement in the posting was obvious towards the middle of the semester. Such improvements are the length of posting, the use of vocabulary, the number of sentences, and the delivery of ideas.

The freedom of time while writing on blogs gave them opportunities for learning the language autonomously. For example S3 said:

S3: Discussion is more open on blog because we don’t have to worry about time limit. There are other people using the blog as well. From there I learn to discuss any topic in different ways.

S12: My discussion ability has improved. I can discuss with my friends without time limit. So we can give a lot of ideas, points during blogging.

The not stressful learning environment can encourage learners to interact with each other without worrying about the language usage. What important for these students were to post ideas and to complete the task.

S26: I can give my comment without stress and limitation. I can post my comments when I’m free and don’t have to rush to give my comments…. No limit to comment on the blog in terms of the duration of the discussion.

S36: Able to discuss on the topic given and share opinion with my group member smoothly because our discussions are going on relax situation and not stress. We do not take it as assignment for this project but as a relax discussion among group member in order to share knowledge and information.
When asked about online discussion versus face-to-face discussion, there were mixed opinions. Learners who are more proficient in the language prefer to have face-to-face discussion compared to low proficiency students. The more proficient students were more confident to speak in English as they had the language. For example students S25 and S34 indicated that:

S25: I am comfortable with live discussions (…) because we can clearly express our opinion (…) with face expressions and confidence (…) because we know people are listening (…) with online discussion (…) no room for expression and most people don’t take our opinion seriously… because it’s only written.  
S34: Live discussion is more effective…can express our opinion and get the opinion directly. If there is any argument, it can be solved immediately which can’t be done on online discussion.

Whereas the low proficiency students preferred to have online discussion due to the difficulty to speak in the language and the level of confidence was also low. They needed more time to think of what to say, what vocabulary to use, and what sentence structure to use. Most of them indicated that while doing the discussion on the blog they had time to think, and monitor their language use which could not be done during face to face discussion. This learning environment provides the students with a non-stress learning environment as most of the students said that they felt comfortable, as they had time to think before expressing their ideas online.

S23: I can’t think on the spot when we have live discussion. I can think better when I write.  
S22: … it is because nobody can see me while I write on blog…gives me time to think the points…  
S21: …I like online because my speaking skills in not good… and afraid that people may laugh at me…  
S19: online discussion is easier and comfortable…gives more freedom to express my view…  
S6: … I can think deeply before writing on blog. I think I discuss better in writing than speak in front of others. Live discussions need us to speak fluently and give respond at the same time. But online discussions, I can take more time to think before I give my opinion.

In fact the low proficiency students said that their usage of English had increased since they participated in blog discussions. Furthermore, they felt more confident to write when they knew that other members could read and give feedbacks on their blogs. The feedbacks given by the group members gave them the opportunity to use the language even further, not only they had to give their opinion and to share ideas they also had to read more on the topic they discussed before they could discuss further on the subject. S27 said

S27: My level of confidence is increasing during online discussion … I have learnt another thing by sharing our ideas on blogs. By using online discussion, I need to prepare my information before I can discuss online confidently.

### 5.6. Language Learning Process while Blogging

The learning process that happened in blogging was analysed using online interaction concept discussed by Mayes and Fowler (1999, in Mayes, 2006) which are interaction with concepts, tasks and people. In this study, the concept was the learners’ ability to understand the reasons they used blogs to learn and how the learning took place while blogging (blog discussion). Understanding the concept of learning online is very important as it will lead to the acceptance or rejection of this type of learning and thus will definitely effect the learning process. In other words, the stage of understanding and accepting of a different learning environment will determine the amount of learning that takes place. The interaction / understanding between the learners’ knowledge of learning language and the online
learning that might offer is crucial, and the learners need to extract the meaning and relate it to their way of learning.

The second learning process is the interaction with tasks. Learners need to construct their understanding of the tasks by actively interact with the task. According to constructivist view, the learning is developed when learners are actively constructing their understanding of the task through participating in the language activities. In this study, it shows that learners were actively involved with the tasks, such as reading, writing, thinking, and arguing that promote learners to actively interact with the tasks. This study also attempts to understand the learning process at this stage by dividing the construction of learning into two levels which are construction of reading, and construction of information. The construction of reading is where learners search and put together relevant information for the tasks by interacting closely with the content of the reading texts. Interacting in this context means the processes of digesting the information by actively involve the critical thinking, reading and writing skills.

The third learning process is the interaction with people through discussions on the blogs. Learners interacting with people is important in education as a successful learning process needs a social context (Mayes, 2006) such as a deep learning support from tutorial and peer-group discussion. Discussion activity on blogs in this study involves learners interact with the group members to conceptualize their ideas on a certain issue by constructing information and argument during discussion on the blogs to come up with a solution of tasks. However, the learning in this situation is always determined by the level of learners’ activeness in participating on the blog. It was found that learners who were more active in the discussion benefit more learning than those who are not.

6. Conclusion
This study found that blogs as a tool for language learning provides a platform for language learners to use the language actively. Learners were able to motivate themselves to use the language, and able to build their autonomy in learning language. It can be concluded that language learners can benefit from language activities done on the blogs if they are actively participate as a blogger and not as a passive reader. Using blogs as a learning tool is not merely giving it to the learners without any pre-plan learning activities because blogs by itself cannot help learners to learn language, unless it comes with an organized language activity.
References