Learning Writing Using the Internet: ESL Students’ Perception

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Abstract: - The internet is significant as a catalyst in the English language learning environment that can be harnessed to enhance the teaching and learning process of the English language in schools. With web applications on the internet like social networks, it would be an easy task to encourage students to use them as a medium to learn and improve their writing skills. Students’ perceptions on learning writing using the internet should be fully recognized, as it would serve its purpose to revitalize the learning process in class. A mixed method study investigating how ESL students view the internet and to what extent the internet affects the students’ writing was conducted. The data was obtained through a questionnaire with close- and open-ended survey questions completed by a group of ESL students. It was found that students agreed that the internet was a source of education and a platform for learning writing. A majority of students indicated that the internet affected their formal writing in terms of correct punctuation and the use of short forms in their informal writing.

Key-words: - ESL, internet, writing skills, perception, social networks

1 Introduction
The world-wide web, or the internet, is an intelligent technology that was made available 25 years ago in the mid-60s. Through the years, the internet has evolved into a seeking-platform which provides the users with the opportunity to gain information, knowledge, entertainment and a place to connect socially. Most students used the internet to seek information and even search for word meanings and pronunciation [1].

The internet comprises of web applications that have helped to maintain relationships and individual interests such as business growth, education, and mutual development. The internet is also a platform to interact with people from abroad. Applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace and others serve a purpose of communicating with one another, even across distances. These are known as social networks.

According to Boyd & Ellison [2], they define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to: 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. The internet is not only a means of communication, but also provides information and knowledge which users can harness for educational purposes.

ICT use enhanced the teaching and learning process [3], and now online technologies have been used successfully in writing instruction such as online writing labs OWLs [4] and writing courses. According to Blair [5], not only does technology have the potential to make the composition, review, and revision process easier, the online platform also provides a way for students to share their writing with a wider audience and use the feedback to gain a more accurate understanding of their intended audience. This crucially supports the element of effective writing. Warschauer [6] also maintains that the interactivity afforded by online writing has been shown to provide authentic and stimulating motivation for writers who might have previously been disenfranchised as potential writers.

This paper will present the results of a study that explored the perceptions of English as second language (ESL) students on learning writing using the internet. The results were gained through the responses of B. Ed. TESL students of the National University of Malaysia in a questionnaire with close- and open-ended survey questions.

2 The Affiliation of the Internet with Writing and Its Values
The use of technology, specifically the internet, as a learning tool has expanded rapidly in the world during the last decade [7]. Only recently has the internet had a surge of mainstream popularity, and ESL teachers around the world are using the internet as a teaching tool in the language due to its many potential benefits, some of which include authentic asynchronous communication between students and teachers, up-to-date discussions and library resources [8].

In his study, Mohd. Asri [8] discovered that the use of internet in the ESL writing classroom was largely positive. However, technical problems proved to be one of the biggest obstacles. Nevertheless, the students stated that they felt their writing ability had improved through the introduction of the internet in their writing class. Other studies also supported the introduction of the internet in a writing classroom as positive motivational tools for students [9] [10] [11].

Mohd. Asri [8] proposed that the internet is popular especially among the younger generation, and it will become increasingly important as education moves well into the 21st century. However, he also suggested that the use of the internet should only be considered as an option to help students learn as there is no solid proof that shows students learn better or more effective online. However, a similar study, Frizler’s [12] showed that students were able to improve writing skills because they used natural language on the internet. The internet also provides opportunity for students to practise the language or be exposed to the language in the classroom [8].

According to previous studies, the integration of the internet in writing was an effective and powerful tool to improve ESL students’ writing skills [13]. The use of technology did improve students’ writing skills [14]. Additionally, as technology becomes more prominent, it would be a “waste” not to exploit its potential in teaching and learning English. Besides, today’s children are “more interested in learning by using a computer compared to more old-fashioned methods” [15].

From these studies, it appears that the relationship between the internet and writing is one that complements each other. However, the studies do not provide enough support or evidence on exactly how the internet complements the learning of writing, as only the encouragement and motivation for students to practise writing is mentioned. Undoubtedly, using the internet in the ESL classroom has its pros and cons. Proper guidance is required if the internet is to be a valuable learning tool for English.

3 Method
The research design of the study was a mixed method approach which included quantitative and qualitative aspects in a survey questionnaire. The quantitative items that the researchers used involved the Likert scale while the qualitative items comprised of three open-ended questions. The quantitative items in the research were the main data and were supported by the qualitative data. The study was carried out in 2012. A 21-item survey that probed a specific scope of issues was distributed to 29 students of the B. Ed TESL program of the National University of Malaysia on the 2nd of May. 29 sets of questionnaires were distributed individually with a return rate of 100%. 65.5% of them are female and the other 34.5% are male. All of the respondents are between 20 to 23 years old. Majority of the respondents are Malay (58.6%), followed by Chinese (20.7%), other races (13.8%) and Indian (6.9%).

4 Results
The data collected from the questionnaires on the students’ perceptions on learning writing using the internet are discussed and presented here in 3 subsections. The first section will shed light on the students’ experience of the use of the social networking sites that are available on the internet. The second section will be on what the students perceive the internet as. This section is then divided further into a sub-subsection that includes the view of the students of the internet as a source of education and as a platform for learning writing. The third section will be an investigation on the extent of the effects of the internet on their writing skills, which are divided into two subcategories: formal writing and informal writing.

4.1 Students’ Experience with the Use of Social Network Sites
This section presents the data collected on the types of social network sites that the students had come in contact with before. The social network sites that were mentioned in this section are YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Blogspot, Wordpress, Tumblr, Forum sites and Myspace. Table 1 below shows that a majority of students are familiar with Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Blogspot and Wordpress, but are less familiar with Myspace, forum sites and Tumblr. From the data, the most favourite social network site is indisputably Facebook, with a percentage of 93.3%, followed by
the second favourite social network site, YouTube, with a percentage of 90%, subsequently followed by Twitter and Blogspot, both sharing the same percentage of the respondents (70%). Next, 56.7% of the respondents had had the experience of using Wordpress, while 40% have used Myspace before. A small number of the respondents had experience using forum sites and Tumblr, with 36.7% and 30% respectively.

According to Wan Ahmad et. al. [13], Facebook allows users to share messages, not only one-to-one but also in a one-to-many mode of communication. In the study, the thread of communication posted on the “wall” was analysed, and it revealed that Facebook was widely used by students to communicate. Facebook has become an “integral part of students’ daily lives and most people’s daily practices” [17]. This explains why a large majority of students are well familiarized with Facebook.

YouTube is a video-sharing site that allows users to watch videos posted by other users as well as upload videos of their own. This multimedia-sharing platform covers a variety of genres, ranging from entertainment to educational. As the second highest used site in this study, students are aware of the presence of YouTube and its benefits, be it for their amusement or as a platform for them to gain knowledge, consciously or subconsciously.

With Facebook and YouTube as the two most used sites to the respondents, we can presume that these two are the ones that are most influential in the writing experience of the students.

Websites such as Twitter, Blogspot and Wordpress are perhaps not commonly used by the students because the students may not have a strong interest in such websites. These websites consume time in the manner of its application and writing purposes. The least used websites, such as Myspace, Tumblr and forum sites, are rarely used because of its purposes that are not in line with the students’ interests. Having said that, we can say that students tend to use websites that trigger their interest.

Table 1. Students’ experience with certain social network sites available on the internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of students (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>27 (90.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>28 (93.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>21 (70.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogspot</td>
<td>21 (70.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordpress</td>
<td>17 (56.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>9 (30.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 What Students See the Internet As

4.2.1 A Source of Education

This sub-subsection presents the items in the questionnaire that elicits a response by the students that relates to the internet as a source of education. The respondents were asked to answer the items in the form of a Likert scale to see how they perceive the use of internet in enhancing their knowledge.

Table 2. Internet as a source of education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It helps me to learn new vocabularies</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>1 (3.4)</td>
<td>17 (58.6)</td>
<td>11 (37.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It gives me new information and knowledge</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>10 (34.5)</td>
<td>19 (65.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helps me to complete my task easier</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>2 (6.9)</td>
<td>13 (44.8)</td>
<td>14 (48.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. It helps me to learn new vocabularies

From Table 2 above, it can be seen that the number of respondents who strongly agreed with the item is 37.9%, followed by 58.6% who agreed. Only the remaining 3.4% disagreed with the statement, which indicates that the internet does help the respondents to learn new vocabularies. One of the respondents, in an open-ended question, also stated that, “Yes, the internet improve the vocabulary development.”

For this item, a significant number of the respondents agreed with the notion that the internet helps expand their vocabularies. This is supported by Yunus et. al.’s study [14]. As Cunningham & Allington [18] said, “Books, videos, and Internet explorations can help build concepts and vocabulary development”.

b. It gives me new information and knowledge

For the second item in this sub-subsection, 100% of respondents agreed, with those who strongly agreed at 65.5%, and 34.5% who agreed. None of the respondents disagreed with the statement, thus supporting the idea that the internet does help the respondents to gain new information and knowledge. One of the respondents stated in the open-ended section, that “I want to be socially...”
updated, through these websites, I can also get information”, whereby the internet allows her to be up-to-date with the latest news and events.

c. It helps me to complete my task easier
93.1% of respondents agreed with this statement. Only 7% of the respondents disagreed with the statement, which suggests that the internet helps the respondents in completing their work easier. One of the responses received through the open-ended section was that he spends “almost 4-5 hours per day to surf the internet in order to complete my assignment.” This reveals that the respondent spent most of his time on the internet, relying on it as a database for knowledge and information to help in his studies and tasks.

4.2.2 A Platform for Learning Writing
This sub-subsection comprises items in the questionnaire that pursues a response from the respondents relating to the internet as a platform for learning writing. The respondents were asked to answer the items on a Likert scale to see how the respondents perceived the internet as a source in learning writing.

Table 3. Internet as a platform for learning writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A medium for me to improve my writing skills.</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>23 (79.3)</td>
<td>6 (20.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It does not help me in my writing skills at all.</td>
<td>7 (24.1)</td>
<td>18 (62.1)</td>
<td>4 (13.8)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. A medium for me to improve my writing skills
From Table 3, 100% of respondents agreed with the notion, with 20.7% strongly agreeing and 79.3% agreeing. None of the respondents disagreed with the statement. This indicates that the internet does improve their writing skills. The responses received through the open-ended survey show that students are more exposed to writing and practice it more when using these sites. Some stated that:

“Yes, because I write a lot. In a way, it helps me to use it as training for my writing skills.”

“Yes, because there more exposure I’ve on writing skills, the better I can write.”

“Yes, because I am constantly constructing words and sentences.”

From the responses and data above, the internet is a good source for students and even individuals who seek guidance in improving their writing skills. The wide variety of websites available on the internet can provide instruction towards achieving competent writing skills.

b. It does not help me in my writing skills at all
From Table 3, 86.2% of respondents disagreed that the internet did not help them in their writing skills at all, while 13.8% of the respondents agreed with the statement. Though some agreed that the internet does not help in their writing, there is a significant portion who agreed that the internet is a place for them to learn writing skills. Those who agreed seem to think that using the internet to learn writing even improves their writing style. He said, “Yes, I do think it works like a charm. I’ve improved my style of writing better than ever.” However, is merely using the internet enough? One respondent does not think so. She said, “No, because until you write things then we can improve. We cannot improve by reading only.”

The contradicting views on whether the internet does or does not help in improving one’s writing skills makes it clear that an awareness on the benefits of the internet is clearly needed to further strengthen the fact that the internet can be a medium to help one in their writing, if used wisely and appropriately.

5.3 The Extent to Which the Internet Affects Students’ Way of Writing

5.3.1 Formal Writing
Respondents were asked whether the internet affects their way of writing based on a four-point Likert scale. An exploration of the students’ perceptions was done to know whether the internet affects their formal writing.

Table 4. Internet affects students’ formal writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to use correct punctuation.</td>
<td>1 (3.5)</td>
<td>6 (20.7)</td>
<td>15 (51.7)</td>
<td>7 (24.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I bring my style of writing on the internet in my formal writing.</td>
<td>3 (10.3)</td>
<td>12 (41.4)</td>
<td>9 (31.0)</td>
<td>5 (17.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Referring to Table 4, the first item presents 75.8% who agreed with the statement of them
having the tendency to use correct punctuation in their writing on the internet. For the second item which seeks insight on whether the respondents are inclined to bring their style of writing on the internet to their purposeful writings, 41.4% and 10.3% of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. Slightly less than half (48.2%) agreed, with only 17.2% who strongly agreed.

Based on the responses from the study on this aspect, many prefer to use correct punctuation when they are writing on the internet and more than half of them did not believe that their formal writing was influenced by their style of writing on the internet. Using and practising accurate punctuation in writing is extremely vital and can go a long way for one to improve their writing skills. To not be influenced by the writing style on the internet may not necessarily be negative as it may do more harm than good to the students when learning and acquiring adequate writing skills.

5.3.2 Informal Writing
Respondents were asked on their views on whether the internet affects their informal writing.

Table 5. Internet affects students’ informal writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to blog about my life, important events and etc.</td>
<td>1 (3.5)</td>
<td>11 (37.9)</td>
<td>12 (41.4)</td>
<td>5 (17.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It influenced me to compose my own lyrics.</td>
<td>3 (10.4)</td>
<td>13 (44.8)</td>
<td>8 (27.6)</td>
<td>5 (17.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use short forms when writing on the internet.</td>
<td>2 (6.9)</td>
<td>5 (17.2)</td>
<td>15 (51.7)</td>
<td>7 (24.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. I like to blog about my life, important events and etc.
For item 1, 41.4% and 17.2% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement respectively, whereas 37.9% of the respondents disagreed with 3.5% who strongly disagreed. From the table above, we can say that the internet generally encourages continuous writing by respondents although it is informal. This shows that the majority of respondents practise their writing when they are on the net.

b. It influenced me to compose my own lyrics
For item 2, 44.8% and 10.4% of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement respectively, while 27.6% of the respondents agreed, followed by 17.2% who strongly agreed. More than half disagreed with the statement and did not feel that the internet influenced them to compose their own lyrics. This could be because song or poem composition is a specific style of writing that not everyone is interested in. However, almost half, 44.8% of respondents do agree that it helps them to do so in some way. This is interesting as a channel for creative writing and expression.

c. I use short forms when writing on the internet
Following that, the third item in this sub-subsection showed that 51.7% and 24.1% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they used short forms when writing on the internet. However, 17.2% disagreed and 6.9% strongly disagreed. This means that 75.8% of students used short forms when writing on the internet. Although writing is practised frequently by the respondents on the internet, the use of short forms might deteriorate their quality in writing as they may unconsciously apply them in their formal writing.

The items highlighted in this segment point to the effects of the internet on the respondents’ informal writing. Item 1, which implies the respondents’ interest in the activity of blogging, showcased an encouraging response from the students. Blogging, which promotes free writing, can be a good platform for the respondents to apply and practise writing, thus improving their writing skills. Item 2, which suggests respondents composing their own lyrics, is also beneficial as it stimulates creativity in their writing. The third item, on the other hand, which depicted a large number of respondents who used short forms when they write on the internet, showed what is commonly done by students as a time-saving effort. On the bright side, by them having the ability to do so, it can be helpful for them to efficiently write down important notes.

6 Conclusion
Through the study on learning writing with the internet with ESL learners as respondents, the results have shown a significantly positive outcome for the further development of this area. The internet, as confirmed from the responses by the students, is seen as a hub of information when it comes to language learning. It is proven that
internet does act as a catalyst in learning, which a teacher can exploit when it comes to the teaching and learning process. With the positive findings, it is also evident that most of the respondents agreed that, in certain ways, the internet provides assistance for them to improve their writing. The amalgamation of the internet in the teaching and learning process can also be significant to teachers, whereby it allows the students to learn writing in an alternative method. It also advocates the students to further develop their writing skills with the various opportunities for writing presented to them on the internet. Knowing that the internet arouses active interaction from the students to connect with others, and that the students of today are constantly spending more time on their computers, taking an approach that uses a medium that is interesting to them as a method for them to acquire and learn writing could be constructive and favourable. With adequate guidance from their educators, this effort could be a successful progression for the students to cultivate competent and excellent writing skills.

References: