

FRONTIERS OF LANGUAGE AND TEACHING

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(IOLC 2010)

Edited by
Azadeh Shafaei



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*Frontiers of Language and Teaching:
Proceedings of the 2010 International Online Language Conference (IOLC 2010)*

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Introduction

This collection covers papers submitted to the 3rd International Online Language Conference (IOLC) held in September 2010. IOLC 2010 was a two-day conference which aimed to provide a forum for academics, practitioners, experts and students to debate current international issues and challenges in the broad area of language learning and teaching. This annual world renowned conference is online, which merely takes place over the internet allowing participants to save accommodation and flight expenses and at the same time help save our planet by reducing CO2 emissions.

All submitted papers went through a double blind review process before a decision was made. This was to ensure the quality level of the conference is kept high.

Azadeh Shafaei
IOLC 2010 Conference Manager

Learner Autonomy through Weblogging: An ICT-mediated Pedagogy in ELT

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions are constantly challenged to take the lead in drawing upon the advantages and educational affordances of an ICT-mediated instruction. The tremendous growth of Internet technology and multimedia expression gained substance in the field of education especially in English Language Teaching (ELT) as learning and teaching tools. Current English teaching reform in China has witnessed a promotion of autonomous approaches to language learning (Rao, 2006). The Chinese Ministry of Education formally highlighted the role of computer and networking in its revised College English Testing Syllabus (CETS) in the year 2004 (Liu & Huo, 2007). Essentially, this teaching reform underscores the importance of technology in stimulating motivation, improving communicative competence, and getting the learners to take control of their own learning to become autonomous learners. This exploratory classroom-based research presents the utilization of weblogs in an institution of higher learning in China to foster learner autonomy and collaborative learning among university students in a regular college program. A total of 108 student-participants participated to reflect on their weblogging experience in a new forum. Results from the attitudinal survey show that weblogs have the capacity to foster collaborative learning and autonomy in language learning.

Keywords: Weblogging, HEIs, autonomy, ELL, ELT, ICT

Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in mainland China especially in higher education institutions continues to attract great attention from the authorities since English is not only a part of state education program but also deemed elemental in producing globally competitive workforce; thus, "...learning English in China is taken seriously because of its place in national development" (*Teacher Change*, 2005, p. 74) and in the pursuit of a modernized and globalized community.

In its desire to transform English language learning in China to meet the challenges and demands of a technology-driven language education, the Chinese Ministry of Education, in 2004, formally underscored a teaching reform that features the integration of computer and networking in College English learning to stimulate students' motivation and to improve communicative competence (Liu & Huo, 2007). The course should pay more attention to promote the learners' learning autonomy and their comprehensive cross-cultural communicative abilities, in an aim to meet the demand of the domestic economic development and the international communication (Xu et al., 2006, p. 13).

Recent English teaching reform in China has witnessed a promotion of autonomous approaches to language learning; however, such a teacher-dominated classroom teaching and centralized examination system in China result in students' strong reliance on teachers in English language learning (Rao, 2006). Although the central government, researchers, and educators have endeavored to re-mode the learning environment by redesigning the curriculum and assessment system, it remains a crucial task among language teachers to keep on innovating ways in making the target language environment more conducive for learning which is critical for second language acquisition and in helping produce autonomous,

competitive, critical, and self-motivated graduates who will be up to the challenges not only of the academic needs and demands but also of our ever competitive society. Since China's membership to WTO in 2001, the demand for university graduates with excellent communicative skills in English necessitates a stronger call for institutions of higher learning in meeting this need. Thus far, in the present situation of China very few graduates are able to meet the requirements of English language competencies needed in the global and market economy. According to a report issued by Cai Jigang as cited by He (2008, p. 302), only 7% of the graduates are qualified interpreters for international conferences, and only 14% are qualified translators for negotiation with foreigners.

The application of Internet technology is seen in this respect an indispensable classroom innovation in creating additional learning spaces for ELT. This educational development enables teachers to reflect beyond the confines of what used to be to the inexhaustible possibility of the effective use of technology in helping learners to improve their skills beyond the four walls of the classroom and encouraging them to be self-directed.

The educational affordances of an ICT-mediated instruction such as the use of weblogs in ELT offer a range of advantages not only for bringing technology into play in classroom instruction but as well as in exploring and examining possible contributions in the domain of action research. The utilization of weblogs provided new possibilities in ELT and innovative applications of technology in encouraging cooperative and self-directed learning among English Language Learners (ELL). It is in this light that weblogging is employed. This paper intends to examine how learners view weblogging in encouraging autonomous and life-long learning. This exploratory action research also seeks to investigate the potential of weblogging as a language learning and teaching tool in helping students to take control of their own learning to become independent learners.

Specifically, this study aims:

- a. To find out the attitudes of the learners on the utilization of computers and weblogs in language learning.
- b. To know the perception of the learners on how useful weblogging is in developing skills in English language learning.
- c. To determine the extent of agreement of the learners on how helpful weblogging is in promoting collaborative learning and learner autonomy in the target language.

Literature Review

Learner autonomy and Internet technology

One of the most important educational aims is to develop learner autonomy which requires a great amount of language teachers' time, effort, ability, persistence, and dedication. Various pedagogical attempts and endeavors have been undertaken with emphasis on the link between learner autonomy and the effective use of Internet technology to foster learner autonomy.

The term learner autonomy was coined by Henry Holec, the 'father' of learner autonomy in 1981 to mean accepting responsibility for one's own learning. Since then, various definitions have been given to refer to the concept that has been of enormous interest to researchers and teachers in ELT practice. It is a process that views a learner working on a task or activity largely independent of the teacher who acts as manager of the learning program and as resource person (Higgs, 1988). Little (1991) regards it as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action which suggests that a learner should develop awareness on what and how he or she learns.

Wenden (1991), on the other hand, considers learner autonomy as a skill and illustrates learners who are autonomous to have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently,

flexibly, appropriately, and independently of a teacher. Providing the students with opportunities for autonomy in learning is one thing while helping them develop and intensify a certain amount of skill acquired is another. When the learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, they are more likely to be able to set achievable and realistic targets, develop ways to cope with new and unexpected events, and assess their own potentials and limitations.

Benson (2001) suggests that approaches to fostering autonomy may also focus on technology or other resources, on the learner himself or herself and/or on decision-making in the learning context. In this study, writing a blog is left to the individual learner to decide on how, what, where, and when to publish or comment on posts for interactive learning and meaningful online language exchange. According to Van Lier (1996), autonomous learners need to make significant decisions about what, how, and when to learn. Weblogging is apparently a case in point. It is likely that weblogs can provide opportunities for the learners to develop such a capacity given that keeping blog posts and commenting on entries manifest independent action as students take responsibility for ownership to their writing which is publicly accessible to the members of the online community.

In the process, they establish a personal agenda for learning (Little, 1994) that sets up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring, and evaluation of the learning process. Autonomous learners assume responsibility for their own learning in most, if not all, of the following ways: (a) setting their own learning goals, (b) identifying and developing learning strategies to achieve such goals, (c) developing study plans, (d) identifying and selecting relevant resources and support, and (e) evaluating their own progress (as cited by Chan, 2000, p. 75).

It is evident in the foregoing discussion that learner autonomy plays a significant role in ELT. The writer of this paper contends that how to get the most out of the students' own potential to develop into self-regulated and autonomous language learners is of foremost concern for many teachers especially in helping learners to structure and realize learning outside the classroom.

Benson (2001) maintains that out of class learning with reference to the efforts of the learners who take classroom-based language courses to find opportunities for language learning and use outside class, is considered as a new area of research of considerable importance to the theory and practice of learner autonomy. Offering students extended learning spaces through weblogs for target language engagement will provide them wider opportunities and broader chances for an authentic learning environment to further their skills and to take more control in English language learning. According to Jacobs (2007) as cited by Wen (2009), only by using and practicing the target language outside the classroom as an after-class activity will students make more progress in their learning of a language. Thus, learner autonomy, within the context of this work is a spin-off of an all-embracing fusion of learning opportunities with learning technologies.

Weblogging in ELT

There is a growing body of literature focusing on blog use in EFL settings. However, in the review conducted by Sim and Hew (2010) on the use of blogs in higher education settings, a majority of the studies (77%) involved participants from countries in North America and Europe compared with other countries; thus, there is a continual need to examine the influence of country contexts on the use of blogs in order to better understand how different geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds might influence the use of blogs differently (p. 8) particularly on the effects of weblogging on learner autonomy.

Some of these published studies include an investigation on weblogs' effect on learner autonomy (Pinkman, 2005), increasing fluency in writing (Fellner & Apple, 2005), teaching

writing and reading English for Specific purposes (Arani, 2005), students' interest in blogging and associated activities (Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma, 2007), and performance outcome (Coutinho, 2007; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Williams & Jacobs, 2004).

In China, most of the researches on learner autonomy focused on cultivating autonomous learning in College English for both English and non-English majors, patterns of learner autonomy, relationship between autonomy and learning strategies as well as autonomous learning and academic performance, and self-access language learning center as new language learning environment, but researches on the use of weblogs in promoting autonomy among Chinese EFL learners is still underexplored.

As an emergent trend used as a vehicle for idea transmission and interaction, weblog is not a road in one direction rather a multidirectional freeway for interactive communication reason why it keeps on attracting and drawing a broader audience-reach and stronger hold and substance in the field of ELT. Because of its easy-to-use interface, frequent text update, interactive forum and comment areas, a number of educators applied weblogging to their EFL classes (Oravec, 2002; Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004).

Weblogs invite interactive and meaningful interface in the target language because learners can publish blogs and commentaries using its post and comment buttons enabling the members of the online learning community to choose their own time for engagement in any topic of their choice as an after-class language practice forum to supplement classroom instruction as well as develop exploration and negotiation skills in the target language. It appears that blogs could well be considered a viable agent for flexible learning.

Weblogging in EAP

The author set up a web-based blog restricted to the students of five English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes where each learner signed up an account to at the start of the semester. The learners were given a comprehensive discussion on the practical and educational targets of this internet-based supplement to language learning when they were first brought to the school's computer laboratory. Particulars on how to open an account and the policies as well as its technical features and on how to create a customizable social network of this state-of-the art technology such as video chat, video and photo sharing, real-time instant messaging, privacy settings, blog posting on either the wall or the forum section, receiving activity feeds, updating current status, news aggregators, tagging and linking were explained in details. Weblog interface from then on happened in their free time and at their disposal since all learners owned a personal laptop and the school's dormitory is internet-ready.

For the most part, commenting on entries and blog posting transpired outside the classroom at the students' convenience. Every week, the teacher posted websites and links that are of interests to the learners, extra reading practice, and supplementary materials aimed at reinforcing learning done in the class and in expanding content coverage. Vocabulary words and common idiomatic expressions as well as business idioms or expressions related to their specialization were also posted using the blog's forum section. The students were encouraged to post comments and share helpful links to their fellow learners in the online community, and their active participation was evident through an overload of commentaries and remarks published on both the forum and the wall sections. Only two blog postings were expected of the learners to publish for the duration of the course on any topic of their choice, yet it's very encouraging to have seen a number of them posted a blogpost every other week on an array of personal, academic and social issues. A manifestation that weblogs have the inherent capacity to motivate the learners in taking the initiative to participate in active learning that promotes autonomy and independence in EFL context. The contention of Blackstone, Spiri,

and Naganuma (2007) that regular blogging also encourages more autonomous learning is evident in this case.

Research Methodology

Respondents of the Study

A total of 108 male and female 3rd year college students with an age range from 20-23 at an English-medium campus in Changchun City, Jilin University—Lambton College (JLU—LC), a private institution of higher learning that is part of Jilin University in Northeast China participated in this study. Of the total number of respondents, 47 were males and 61 were females specializing in Business Administration, Management Information Systems, Electronics Engineering Technology, Banking and Finance, and International Accounting. EAP 300 is one of the academic English courses taken by students at JLU—LC upon successful completion of at least one and half years of EFL classes as a major entry-requirement to be admitted into the regular college program.

Data Gathering Instrument

A survey design was employed for this study. A survey questionnaire was developed and administered to determine the participants' responses on the use of weblogs in English language learning and whether or not the utilization of the same helps the students in fostering learner autonomy and collaborative learning.

The end-of-semester instrument completed by students has become pervasive throughout higher education (Snare, 2000). According to Hinton (1993) as cited by Lewis and Seymour (n.d.), "there is a substantial research which concludes administering surveys to students can be both valid and reliable, providing a wealth of knowledge about the attitudes, behavior, and values of students." It is viewed as an unbiased tool that embodies assumptions about teaching and learning whose results will play a significant role in determining whether the students are really learning and in evaluating the effectiveness of classroom activities and strategies.

As a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information (Cohen, 2000), the questionnaire was used in collecting the data needed as such is the appropriate approach to use in gathering information on attitudes and motivations of learners in the area of second language acquisition.

The instrument administered to the respondents contained a total of 33 items. Six of which for demographic information, one statement that requires a yes or no response, one item for a statement that requires checking the box for the corresponding reply, 20 rating scale items on degree of agreement or disagreement in a Likert Scale format, and five statements that require a brief response.

Data Gathering Procedure

To collect the data needed, the survey instrument was administered to the study-participants at the end of each term for the Academic Year 2009-2010. The questionnaire was distributed to the five EAP 300 classes. The five groups under study went through similar weblogging engagements and associated activities that lasted one term. Forty-two respondents from two classes were from 2009 fall semester while the other three classes of 66 respondents were from 2010 spring semester. Every ENG faculty of JLU—LC teaches three classes every semester, but the writer of this paper handled only two in fall 2009 because the supposed third group had already taken the course. The respondents were made to understand the objectives of this classroom-based research, and the responses that they will reflect on the questionnaire were explained to be accounted for at length since their feedback will significantly contribute in enhancing teaching strategies, building up better classroom

activities and in assessing the effects and implications of weblogging as a technology-based pedagogy in ELT particularly in the Chinese context.

Findings and Discussions

Selected findings of the attitudinal survey are presented, analyzed and discussed in this section.

Attitudes toward Computers and Weblogs in Language Learning

The results of the survey show that the learners have a remarkable receptiveness to the use of computers in the language classroom to stimulate target language learning. For instance, 88.89% of the participants (96/108) “Strongly agreed” and “Agreed” for the statement that they are comfortable working with computers (see Figure 1) while 93.52% of the participants (101/108) “Strongly agreed” and

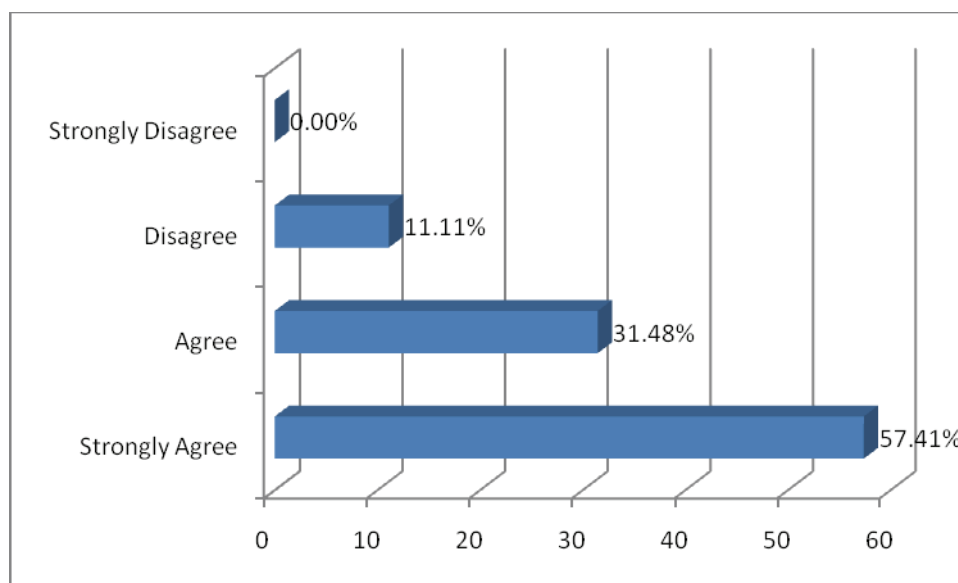


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who agree with statement 3.7: *I am comfortable working with computers*

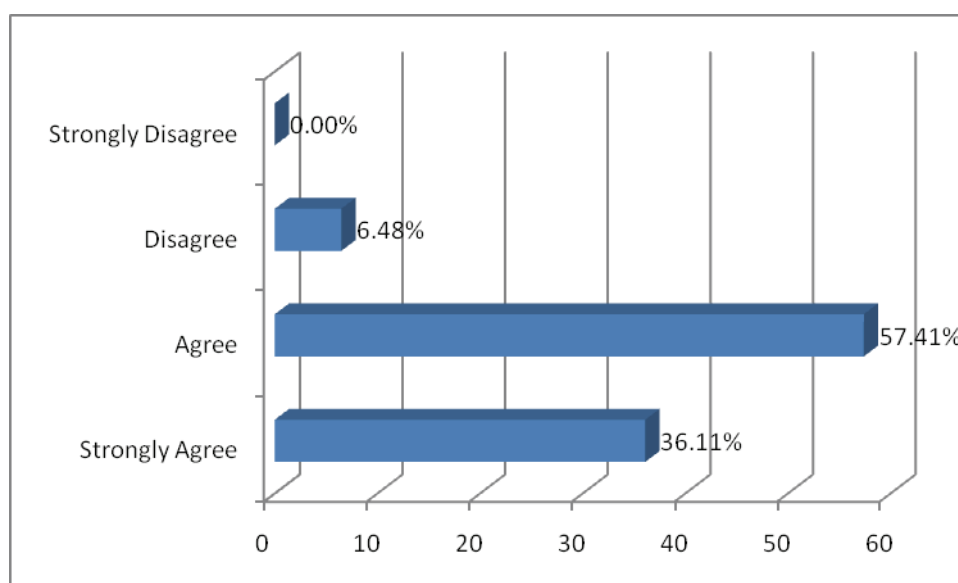


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who agree with statement 3.8: *Using the computer enhances language learning*

“Agreed” that using the computer enhances language learning (see Figure 2). Consequently, this highly positive inclination to technology-based language learning generated a correspondingly high regard on the application of weblogs in the language classroom as shown in Figures 3 and 4. On items 3.2, “I like weblogging as a language learning activity,” and 3.10, “Language learning can also take place online; for instance, the use of weblogs,” 96.3% of the respondents (104/108) articulated strong agreement on both statements. The student-participants expressed an impressive affirmation that an internet-enhanced language teaching and learning will supplement classroom-based learning. The majority of respondents believe that the advent of modern technology is a boon to both the teachers and learners particularly in the context of second language learning.

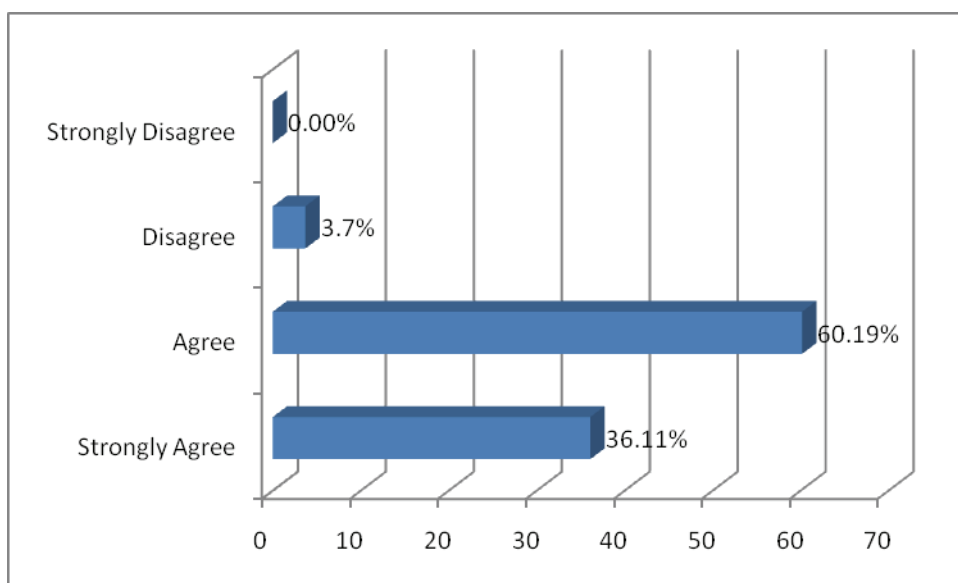


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who agree with statement 3.2: *I like weblogging as a language learning activity*

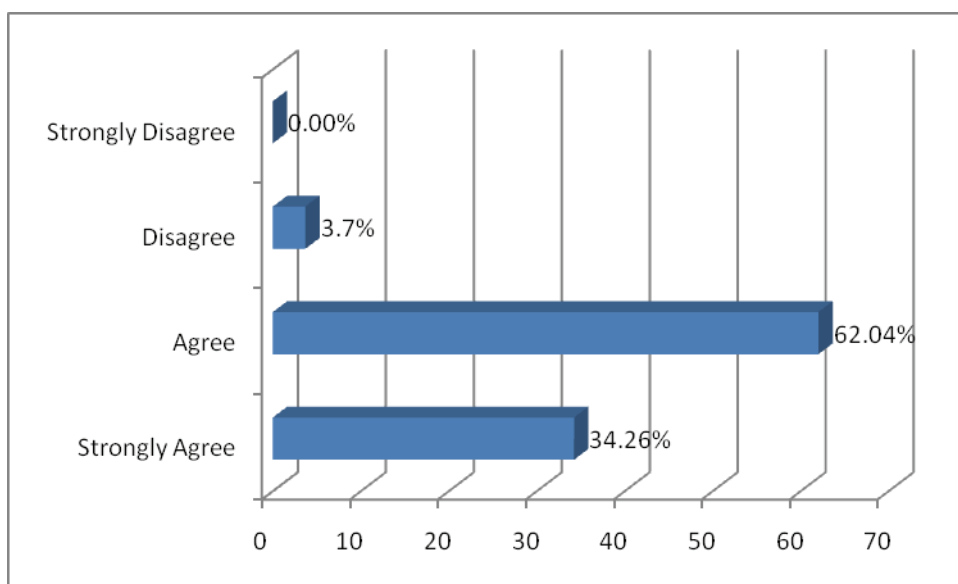


Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who agree with statement 3.10: *Language learning can also take place online; for instance, the use of weblogs*

It is apparent from these results that learners are disposed to view computers becoming agents of educational change in producing an extended learning environment beyond the physical classroom in which language learning knows no boundary. The following responses from the respondents demonstrate this claim:

“I strongly agree that using computers in English language classes enhances language learning because it encourages us to learn English. It provides us opportunities to learn English each time we open our computers.”

“Computers offer more functions. It can help us solve problems very quickly. We can use computer to read the English news and watch English movies.”

“I agree because we should practice English more. In our life, we speak Chinese every day and we need more practice in learning English and weblogging can provide us these opportunities.”

“Yes, of course! We know that English is becoming the first language in the world and Internet makes the world smaller; they’re the most important tools for us to learn more and better enhance our English language skills.”

Stables (2000) pointed out that learners with positive attitudes are more adaptable and accommodating of the new learning environment, and their attitudes are closely related to how this technology is used in the classroom. Lee et al (2002) affirmed that having the right attitudes provide the learners with the proper psychological preparation for a computer-based learning classroom.

We can infer from the preceding responses that attitudes of the students toward a computer-based classroom are pivotal in successfully integrating technology in language teaching.

Perception on How Useful Weblogging is in ELL

The survey results also revealed that weblogging in ELL was perceived extremely favorable by most students. Figure 5 indicates an impressive 95.37% of the respondents chose “Strongly agree” and “Agree” for statements 3.1, 3.4, 3.6, and 3.9 (see Appendix).

The figures disclosed a great deal of high regard from the respondents that weblogging is incredibly useful in ELL not only because of its novelty but mainly due to its accessibility, expediency, and efficacy as an intermediary mode of increasing contact in the target language. It provided the learners an extended online language community and reading and writing practice that promoted research and exploration of information from various websites published in English through the Internet.

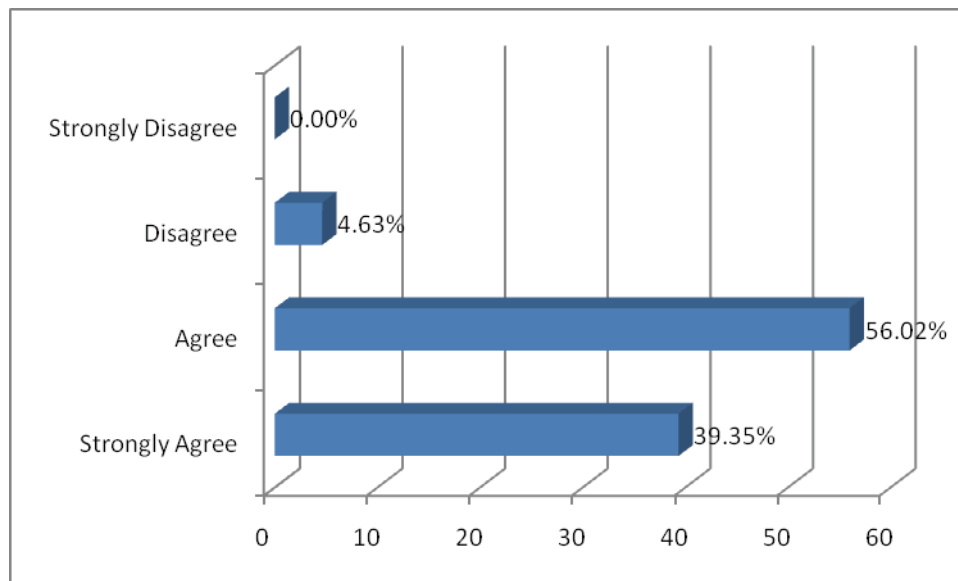


Figure 5: Aggregate percentage of respondents who agree with statements 3.1, 3.4, 3.6, and 3.9 (see Appendix)

These remarks from the respondents substantiate this highly positive affirmation:
 “It’s very interesting and useful. We use weblogging to communicate with others in English from anywhere.”

“Weblogging gives us much time and space to express our ideas.”

“Weblogging is a good language tool. It helps you study language. You can study language easily.”

“Everyone can share his or her feeling in English, and all classmates talk with you in English. Weblogging is a very fast internet communication tool as well as very interesting.”

“The internet is a good information box. We always need information to help us learn English. I think weblogging is the best tool.”

“It’s practical. It’s really a perfect tool to sharing all the information.”

“Weblogging is really a useful way to study English, and it can help you communicate more freely with your friends and teachers. In addition, it can increase students’ interest in English.”

This learning innovation, indeed, offers learning opportunities online (Godwin-Jones, 2003) in providing extra reading practice for students, increasing the sense of community in a class, and encouraging students to participate (Stanley, 2005), in providing students with a forum for an electronic exchange of ideas with peers which can be motivating (Yang et. al., 2005), and in increasing contact with target language for a meaningful, immersive and expressive engagement with the members of the academic online community.

When learners find a certain learning experience of value, interest is fueled; thus, a stronger propensity to steering the learners in becoming autonomous.

Weblogging for Collaborative Learning

The results indicate great potential of weblogs in encouraging collaborative learning. The respondents recognize their “peers or fellow language learners” an essential component as partners in enhancing language learning and in nurturing learner autonomy.

As shown in Figure 6, 93.75% of the respondents “Strongly agreed” and “Agreed” that weblogging can provide a fertile ground for active, constructive, and cooperative learning experience. Most of the learners conveyed that the various blog-activities such as commentaries, posts, and feedback from classmates rendered the learning experience worthwhile and helped them in language learning and in enhancing what they’ve learned. It’s also on the fact that support and encouragement are readily available, and they can work together in their own time since most of them live in the school’s dormitory and the teacher is just a click away for any problems they may run into.

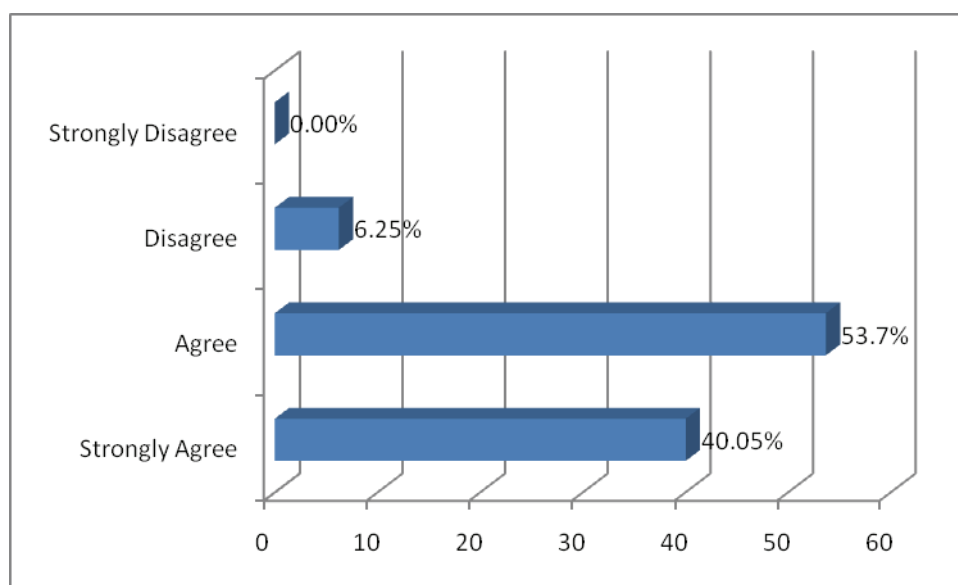


Figure 6: Aggregate percentage of respondents who agree with statements 3.12, 3.13, 3.15, and 3.16 (see Appendix)

To bear witness to the potential of making use of weblogs in ELT, responses from the learners are as follows:

“Through weblogging, we can learn from each other and study together.”

“Weblogging is a great way to use more English words and sentences during communication, and we can improve our English learning not only from ourselves but also from others.”

“Weblogs help us find people to talk to who have the same interest.”

“It’s great, and it’s fun because we are connected by this blog, and it is really amazing to learn together. We can use weblogs to discuss our homework”

“Every language learner can make friends. We can talk with each other and help each other. That I think is very useful for learning English.”

“In EAP class, we can blog with our team members to design how to make a good class presentation by exchanging ideas through weblogs.”

“We can get feedback from our classmates that help us grow, and we can share our personal experience at there.”

Godwin-Jones (2003) stressed that the more involved they all are in this learning innovation like creating entries and commenting, the more likely that this engagement establishes a viable learning environment. Cooperative learning places the students in a non-threatening learning environment wherein students can be connected in a more encouraging and motivating educational experience.

We can deduce from these responses that it’s not only the teachers who may have a strong influence on the development of the target skills, but also the participation of the members of the learning community. Each of whom has a share and claim in everyone’s collaboration and support in working together as language cohorts in a learner-centered environment that reinforces autonomy in learning.

Weblogging for Learner Autonomy

Equally impressive was the response of the respondents to statements 3.3, 3.11, 3.17, 3.18, and 3.19 (see Appendix) upon which 92.94% “Strongly agreed” and “Agreed” that weblogs have the capacity to foster a deep sense of responsibility, resourcefulness, creativity, and initiative among learners in taking more control of their own learning and in learning to learn (see Figure 7).

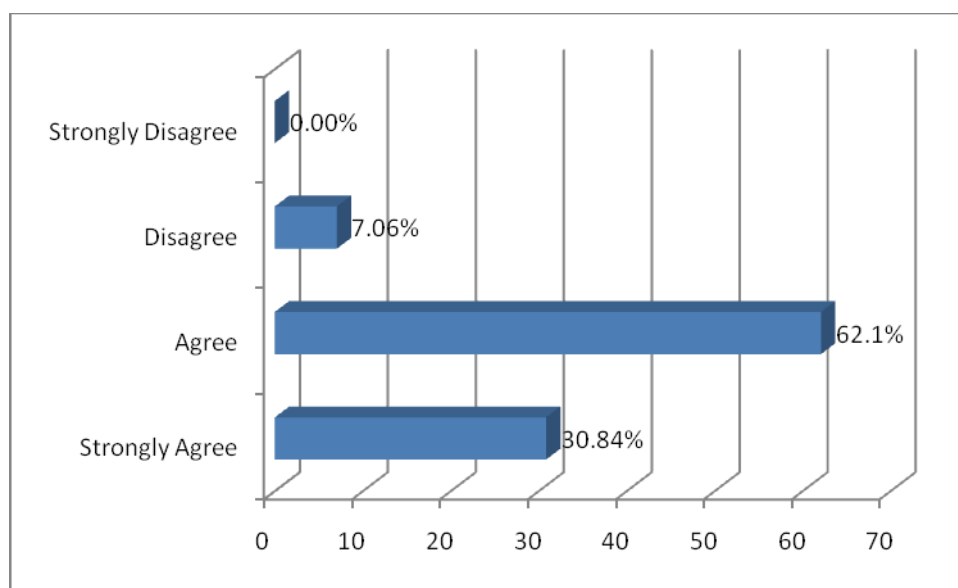


Figure 7: Aggregate percentage of respondents who agree with statements 3.3, 3.11, 3.17, 3.18, and 3.19 (see Appendix)

Williams and Jacobs (2004) pointed out that blogs provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers. Weblogs’ capacity to promote autonomy in learning is evident from these responses:

“Weblogs give us our own space. I can write anything I want my classmates and teacher to know without restriction.”

“Weblogging has many materials, and I can research other materials to help me in learning the language. Weblogging made English study possible everywhere.”

“It is a great way that we can communicate with each other in English outside the class. I can learn English in my free time once I’m on blog.”

“Weblogs made English learning interesting, and we don’t need to stay in the classroom to learn English; we also learn and practice our skills in daily life.”

“The fact that I have more blogposts than expected shows that weblogs can encourage a learner to be responsible and independent in language learning because it is very useful and interesting.”

It is apparent that the learners regard weblogs to have a built-in capacity in leading them to a self-directed learning through regular blog posting. Producing contents (blogposts and commentaries, etc.) more often than a teacher might expect articulates initiative, responsibility, independence and autonomy.

As expressed in one of the responses, weblogs allowed the learners to make decisions on the content they post. This freedom of selecting blog topics left them to make meaningful decisions and enabled the students to assume much of the responsibility for their own learning. Ward (2004) obtained similar accounts from his students when asked what they liked best about weblogs, and one of the responses was the freedom the learners had in choosing their own topics and express their personal views.

Learners enjoy being given choices of various e-learning activities; hence, their active involvement and great regard in this blog-based supplement to language learning which are reckoned crucial in developing learner independence and autonomy which should always be the case when sustainable skills are being built up in an ICT-mediated instruction.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this small-scale study show that this evolving medium in English language education, blog-based approach, proved to bring about significant contributions in promoting an active online learning community and greater learner autonomy.

Over the course of the learners’ blog-exchanges, they have incredibly shown that they are more likely to continue using weblogs owing to their belief that they have ownership of that learning space and have already built their own personal learning communities accessible anywhere. Educators who view computer-mediated instruction rather beneficial need to capitalize on the advantages and power that this technology has to offer.

It is important to note from the results that having positive attitude toward learning technologies is central to language teaching. It stands to reason that teachers who positively consider technology a viable conduit for social and linguistic gains stand a better chance of inculcating the desired behavior in their students. A positive perception toward learning with technology builds up stronger impulses that encourages collaborative learning, promotes learner autonomy, and fosters the likelihood of engaging learners in lifelong learning pursuits.

One of the issues though that needs to be given attention to is on how this innovation for learner autonomy would be translated into continuing autonomous language learning when the course for which weblog was designed for is over. Further research needs to focus on the sustainability of this online language learning activity that proved to be beneficial in nurturing team working abilities, ICT potentials, and learning to learn skills. How successfully learners interact with the members of the blog community will also rely to a great extent on how relevant, meaningful, and engaging the activities are. Language educators, in this respect, who are into multi-modal media of communication and expression like weblogging and other ICT-related language activities should continue to generate and

create conditions that reinforce and bolster independent learning. Moreover, language teachers need to keep on developing a list of best practices that encourages flexibility in learning, greater interactivity, and sustainability. The educational affordances of weblogging as an emerging paradigm for English language education make it a pragmatic and realistic tool for language teaching and learning since it involves and furthers high levels of student control and direction.

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Appendix

Survey items rated on a Likert Scale and related to the present study

People's Republic of China
JILIN UNIVERSITY—LAMBTON COLLEGE
 English for Academic Purposes 300

Name (Optional): _____ Age: _____ Gender: _____
 Hometown: _____ Year Level: _____
 Major: _____

1. I have my personal computer/laptop: Yes No

2. I check my blog: (Check the appropriate box)

- Daily
- Every other day
- Two to three times a week
- Not at all

3. Check the appropriate column. How do you find weblogging as a classroom activity tool in English language learning? To what extent is weblogging helpful in promoting learner autonomy and collaborative learning in the target language?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3.1 The use of weblogs encourages writing & reading in the target language.				
3.2 I like weblogging as a language learning activity.				
3.3 I always take the initiative to check posts, make comments, and publish blogposts.				
3.4 Weblogging provides a classroom extension for language learning and development.				
3.5 The weekly posts published by the teacher provide us exposures to develop our English language skills.				
3.6 Weblogs promotes exploration of information from various websites published in English.				
3.7 I am comfortable working with computers.				
3.8 Using the computer enhances language learning.				
3.9 Weblog activities help learners to conduct research using the internet.				
3.10 Language learning can also take place online; for instance, the use of weblogs.				
3.11 I think online learning like weblogs should be included in English classes.				
3.12 My classmates' comments on the forum section's posts help in language learning and in enhancing what I've learned.				
3.13 Feedback from my classmates is a positive learning experience.				
3.14 I like it when the teacher gives feedback/comments in my posts.				

3.15 Weblogging promotes collaborative learning since we can work together in our own time.				
3.16 Weblogging cultivates cooperation, encouragement, and support among language learners.				
3.17 Weblogging provides us opportunities to learn on our own and nurtures our sense of initiative.				
3.18 Weblogging fosters resourcefulness, creativity, and independent learning.				
3.19 Weblogging is a very good venue for language learners to discuss with each other and communicate in the target language.				
3.20 Weblogging should be continued even if the course for which it was designed for is over.				

4. I like weblogging because...

5. In what way does weblogging promote collaborative learning? Give example situation based from your own experience.

6. In what way does weblogging promote autonomy or independent learning?

7. Do you agree that using computers in English language classes enhances language learning? (Explain).

8. I recommend weblogging to all English language learners because...

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

To Teach or not to Teach: Pronunciation Challenge in ESL

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Abstract

This paper explores a range of critical issues in pronunciation tuition/acquisition in language learning. The focus of the investigation is, first, on the autoethnographic study of language learning over an extended period of time. Then, the personal case study is juxtaposed to transferring the conceptual and practical skills of the author (as a learner) onto ‘teaching’ of pronunciation by the author (as a teacher).

At the centre of the discussion are migrant learners of English as a Second Language in a metropolitan language classroom setting in Australia. The learners’ diverse linguistic and educational background calls for flexible approaches to pronunciation tuition/facilitation, posing pedagogic dilemmas about how speech can be learnable or teachable. Particular attention is paid to issues of how language sounds and intonation construct meaning that interlocutors express in interaction.

Key research questions are: What constitutes intelligible pronunciation and who decides? What amount of guidance is required for acquisition of communicative pronunciation? How does pronunciation proficiency lead to learner empowerment?

The significance of the investigation is in attempting to find balance in pronunciation tuition between minimal and maximal guidance. Further, the study points to learner self-reliance on previous language learning experience as a source of skills in conceptualizing and acquiring new sounds and speech. Finally, it emphasizes a need for further research in how learner cognition of oral language skills and patterns of mutual intelligibility of sounds in learning one or multiple language/s can best be utilized in learning/teaching ESL.

Keywords: ESL/EFL, pronunciation, sound reconceptualisation, communication, minimal guidance

Introduction

In the 21st century pronunciation has finally become an essential element of language instruction and has taken its long overdue place in teaching ESL/EFL, sometimes referred to as global/international English, including legitimate varieties of English/es spoken around the world. Over the last sixty years various methods have been applied in pronunciation tuition with or without clear understanding of diagnostic evaluation of learner needs and facilitation strategies for improvement. Having reached a more balanced approach to pronunciation tuition/facilitation, now is the time for us to consider what the future research holds: innovative e-pronunciation applications, new ideas for face-to-face practice or a synergistic blend?

As a lifelong learner of languages, I have developed a keen interest in pronunciation issues. In this paper I use a personal autoethnographic case study to analyse my own pronunciation learning experiences and compare them to current practices by looking at what has worked well, how we measure success and who ultimately decides on the norm. Some original research ideas are also discussed, namely conceptualising sounds and guidance instruction in relation to memory, relevant for pronunciation learning. Finally, it is necessary to establish how proficiency in speech increases learners’ confidence, self-esteem and ultimately wellbeing, allowing the learner to claim total social inclusion.

Summary of Previous Research

Since World War 2 approaches to instruction in English pronunciation have touched upon both extremes, from extensive sound drilling to almost complete neglect. In the period from 1940s till 1960s the former extreme peaked as it seemed a matter of utmost importance to achieve a native-like or near native-like pronunciation via repetition drills of isolated sounds, minimal pairs and short dialogues or rhyming sentences. More specifically, the accent was on phonemes and word stress. This method declined in the 1970s and 1980s when pronunciation practices in the classroom were drastically reduced and superseded by communicative methodology (Morley 1991). In contrast, the former approaches were often based on the audio-lingual method, which included practices that 'range from mildly eccentric to the bizarre' (Nunan 1995, p. 100).

It seems that the two extreme approaches finally started balancing out in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the shift of focus from guided pronunciation drills in isolation to contextual pronunciation within communicative framework. These two decades were marked by growing flexibility in giving learners more freedom and thus responsibility for their own pronunciation acquisition in a communicative context, preceded by learner perception of speech reception and production. Thus the trend of the post-war years to practice pronunciation by using mnemonic drills and imitating native speakers with RP or North American English standard was replaced by situated practice. Instruction in articulation features and teacher dominated correction techniques were substituted for self-awareness, leading to self-correction and/or teacher indication of errors, placing more responsibility on the learner with varying success, but within communicative oral environment (Pennington and Richards 1986).

The development of computer assisted language learning (CALL) programs has flourished since mid-1990s, impacting on the way pronunciation is taught/facilitated, learned and practised. Currently, three main types of applications are used in multimedia environments. The first one is based on digital recording where learners independently compare their own voices to models; the second type is similar to the first one except for including a visual speech graphic - wave, so learners can see their intonation/pitch; the third application, automatic speech recognition (ASR), offers feedback and is based on establishing the learners' proximity to a native speaker norm (Hubbard 2009). A software platform that uses ASR and Artificial Intelligence Technologies¹ is also available, which provides immediate feedback and remediation in individualised training via text, graphics and audio. Comparative studies have yet to be done to measure success rates.

Methodology

The research design focuses on employing a case study approach based on the author's experience in learning languages and teaching ESL within the framework of current theoretical approaches to pronunciation instruction. Further, key pronunciation aspects are explored along with the critical issues of learner motivation and the roles of teachers and learners. New interdisciplinary ideas are discussed for their value in understanding the learning challenges and prospective applicability in pronunciation acquisition, namely reconceptualisation of sounds and minimal guidance in instruction. Finally, the method aims at drawing together the central points of the analysis to offer a balanced position.

Autoethnographic Case Study

In my personal experience of learning languages, a combination of methods has been applied (if any) in pronunciation training, depending on objectives, setting, age, whether a particular language was living or dead, on instructors and available resources. My native language is