

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Tumblr as a Medium to Improve Students' Writing Skills

¹Melor Md Yunus and ²Hadi Salehi

¹Faculty of Education, University Kebangsaan Malaysia.

²Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran.

ABSTRACT

The implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become one of the vital current phenomena especially in education. Generally, the integration of social networks into learning has proven to enhance students' participation which has led them into an interactive learning. In language teaching especially in an ESL context, such integration is needed to enhance students' interest towards language learning and motivate them to improve their language skills. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to examine the use of Tumblr as a medium to improve secondary school students' writing skills and second, to identify the factors which support the effectiveness of using Tumblr as a medium. To achieve the purpose of the study, a validated questionnaire was administered to 30 teacher trainees who were randomly selected from TESL undergraduate students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The findings showed that about two thirds of the respondents agreed that Tumblr, as one of the social networks, can be used as an effective medium in teaching writing skills. Moreover, the majority of the surveyed teacher trainees stated that different features in Tumblr can motivate and help students to learn interactively via internet. However, some limitations might prevent teachers from using Tumblr as an effective tool in teaching and learning.

Key words: Tumblr, ICT, Writing skills, Social network, Teacher trainees.

Introduction

Mircblogging refers to a kind of blogging that lets the users write messages less than 200 characters about their daily lives and send them to friends or other interested observers via instant messaging, text messaging, email or the web (Java *et al.*, 2007). Microblogging, according to DeVoe (2009), is different from regular blogging because freedom and brevity are the main characteristics of microblogging whereas traditional blogging focuses on established topics and uses stylized and lengthy prose. Microblogs are viewed as short pieces of information that do not require the author to devote or plan as much time in as a traditional blog. Sakaki *et al.* (2010) state that another characteristic of microblogging is that it usually occurs in real-time and that is why it differs from traditional blogging. Users often add or update information regarding what they are doing either while they are doing it or soon after. The real-time feature of microblogging often allows daily news to spread faster than ever before.

Java *et al.* (2007) pointed out that with the increasing trend for a faster mode of communication, microblogging can fulfill this need. They believe that microblogging encourages creating shorter posts and it decreases the users' requirement of time and thought investment for content generation. Boyd *et al.*, (2010) believe that a fast paced conversation environment can be emerged through microblogging because it requires a little effort and time investment. Posting the updates, ideas, and simple notifications is the power of microblogs. This idea is supported by Ebner and Maurer (2009), as they said this application can expand the types of microblogging by expressing the communication aspect. Moreover, microblogs can encourage students to be more expressive and develop their creativity in writing as well as can train the students to judge and review on their friends' quality of essays and blog's writing. Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Plurk, Yammer and Tumblr are the most popular microblogging platforms; however, this study just focuses on the use of Tumblr as a medium to improve secondary school students' writing skills and to identify the factors which support the effectiveness of using Tumblr as a medium in teaching writing skill.

Literature Review:

Tumblr Features:

Tumblr, founded in 2007, is a micro blogging website that is becoming increasingly popular in the Web 2.0 world. This platform allows users to post text, images, videos, links, quotes and audio to their "tumblelog", a

short-form blog. Tumblr gives users the easiest and fastest way to blog, whether they want to publish text, audio or video material (Matteson, 2011). Users can follow other tumblelogs, just like on Twitter, and their updates appear in one stream on the Dashboard. The “like” button lets one user tell another that they like his or her content, and the “reblog” button easily reposts content from one tumblelog onto another, providing positive feedback. Users also can comment on each other’s post by having ‘Disqus’ application in Tumblr. These features can attract the students to interact and write more in the form of blogging in Tumblr.

According to Matteson (2011), what Tumblr offers is an unmatched ease of use. Creating an account on Tumblr is as easy as breathing. An email address, a password, and the URL for the new blog (e.g., newsweek.tumblr.com) are three pieces of information required to create an account on Tumblr. Even, there is no profile to fill out, no likes or dislikes to list, and nowhere to even enter a name. That is why there are also no advertisements or promotions on the sidebars (Matteson, 2011).

Some users view Tumblr as a platform where Blogger, Twitter, and Facebook meet (Matteson, 2011). A blog on Tumblr is similar to any other blog in that the site owner uses it to publish opinions, thoughts, interests and experiences, and readers can then post comments and responses. However, Tumblr changes this way by adding interesting social networking features to the website. For example, as on Twitter, Tumblr users can follow other blogs, see who is following them, and “reblog” the entries they like from other blogs. Similar to Facebook, Tumblr users can also “like” other blog posts. Therefore, the combination of social networking and blogging provides a space that is both creative and collaborative (Matteson, 2011). However, Tumblr is regarded as one part of the emerging movement to curate the web and to shrink it down to what is the word of mouth (Meltzer, 2010). Tumblr is relatively young in the world of the web so that it can change or be changed by its growing popularity.

Benefits of Tumblr:

Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and Tumblr have different significant functions. According to Donath and Boyd (2004), people can expand their communications with others through social media such as Tumblr. They state that social networks are sources of emotional and financial support, and of information about jobs, other people and the world at large. Marquart (2010) believes that Tumblr can benefit users in these ways through functions such as reblogging and the Ask Box. These two functions help users to create many communities within Tumblr.

Tumblr helps users to have more than one contributor to a blog. This feature also helps users to create more communities and it is useful when it comes to regularly updating a blog. In fact, it means that the effort of producing content can be divided among an unlimited amount of contributors (Marquart, 2010). Therefore, Tumblr users can easily be connected to bloggers with the same interests to create a specific Tumblr page dedicated to an interest such as novels, poems, movies, or even fashion.

According to Marquart (2010), Tumblr can allow users to submit posts to blogs that are not their own even when a blog is accessed by only one user. Then the posts are screened by the blog owner. Submissions are posted if they are relevant to the blog category and fit the overall feel of the blog. The credit will be given to the user who submitted the post, usually by way of linking to his or her webpage (Marquart, 2010).

Methodology:

This study employed a questionnaire survey to measure the perceptions of teacher trainees on the effectiveness of Tumblr as a medium to improve secondary school students’ writing skills. The participants consisted of 30 TESL undergraduate students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) who were randomly selected from the TESL UKM students, regardless of the year of studies, gender and ethnicity. The rationale of having this kind of respondents is to get the authentic responses from the future English teachers about teaching writing to secondary school students. The participants were familiar with the use of ICT since most of them utilize the Internet for the purposes of gathering information, email, social networking etc. Besides, we would like to know their perspectives about using social networks such as Tumblr in writing, since they are among young generation who use more social networks compared to elder generation. The participants ranged from 21 to 25 years of age.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section A, including three items, elicited demographic information regarding age, gender and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Band of the respondents. Section B consisted of five items and was designed to elicit teacher trainees’ knowledge of social networks. Section C, including seven items, was designed to elicit teacher trainees’ perceptions on the effectiveness of Tumblr as a medium to improve students’ writing skills. The items in this section were closely related to the Tumblr integration in teaching and learning process, and they were designed based upon four-point Likert scale of agreement, where one = strongly disagree, two = disagree, three = agree and four = strongly agree. The four-point Likert scale was employed as it is one of the most commonly accepted Likert scales in the education field

(Melor Md Yunus, 2007; Melor Md Yunus, Salehi, and Kashefian-Naeeni, 2011). Section D included an open-ended question to allow the teacher trainees the freedom to give their views regarding their own experiences in using Tumblr and the integration and implementation of Tumblr into the teaching and learning process. In the analysis phase of the study, frequencies and percentages for each item were calculated and presented in tables.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Data

Section A of the questionnaire dealt with the respondents' background information. The respondents were between the age of 21 years and 25 years. More than one third of the respondents (36.6 %) were 21 and 22 years old (see Table 1). Less than half of them (46.6 %) were 23 years old and 16.6 % of them were 24 and 25 years old. Fifty three percent of the respondents were female and 47% of them were male. There was no equality in the number of male and female respondents because the respondents were chosen randomly. Moreover, out of 30 respondents, 70% of them had obtained band 3-4, and 30% of them had achieved band 5-6.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Items	Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age	21 years	4	13.3
	22 years	7	23.3
	23 years	14	46.6
	24 years	2	6.6
	25 years	3	10.0
Gender	Male	14	47.0
	Female	16	53.0
MUET Band	1-2	0	0.0
	3-4	21	70.0
	5-6	9	30.0

Knowledge Of Social Networks:

Section B of the questionnaire was designed based on basic questions about blogging specifically Tumblr. When the respondents were asked about having a blog, more than three-fourths of the respondents (77 %) said that they have a blog and less than one-fourth of them (23 %) stated that they do not have a blog (see Table 2). Moreover, the majority of the teacher trainees (73 %) have one or two blogs and one-fifths of them have three or even more blogs. In addition, when the participants were asked about having a Tumblr account, 60% of them stated that they have a Tumblr account and 40% said that they do not have a Tumblr account.

Table 2: Teacher trainees' knowledge of social networks.

Items	Responses	Frequency	Percent (%)
Do you have a blog?	Yes	23	77.0
	No	7	23.0
How many blogs do you have?	None	2	7.0
	1-2	22	73.0
	3 and above	6	20.0
Do you have a Tumblr account?	Yes	18	60.0
	No	12	40.0

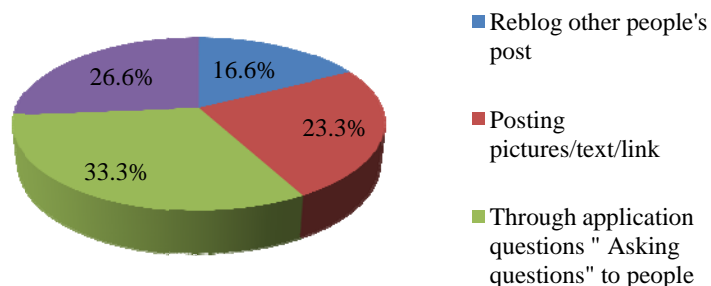
Less than half of the respondents (46.6 %) claimed that they blog for pleasure and more than one-third of them (36.6 %) blog for sharing ideas with friends and expressing their feelings (see Table 3 and Figure 1). Moreover, less than one-fifth of the respondents (16.6 %) stated that they blog in order to improve their writing skills. The results show that the students usually blog for aesthetic purposes rather than educational purposes because only 16.6% of the respondents answered that they blog in order to improve their writing skills. Therefore, this study might be a stepping stone to aware students that applications such as Tumblr can be used to improve their writing skills as well.

When the respondents were asked about the features in Tumblr that could help them improve writing, one-sixth of them (16.6 %) claimed that reblog other people's post can improve writing. Less than one-fourth of the respondents (23.3 %) believed that posting pictures, text and link can be effective in writing. In addition, about 60 percent of the teacher-trainees stated that Tumblr can help them improve writing through application questions "Asking questions" to people and commenting on other's post. The results show that there is only small range of differences between the features that is between 16.6% and 33.3%, which actually shows that all these features have their own significance in enhancing writing skills.

Table 3: Teacher trainees' knowledge of social networks.

Items	Responses	Frequency	Percent (%)
For what purpose do you blog?	Improving writing skills	5	16.6
	Sharing ideas with friends / expressing feelings	11	36.6
	For pleasure	14	46.6
What features in Tumblr that you think could help to improve writing?	Reblog other people's post	5	16.6
	Posting pictures / text / link	7	23.3
	Through application "Asking questions" to people	10	33.3
	Commenting on other's post	8	26.6

What features in Tumblr that you think could help to improve writing?

**Fig. 1:** Features in Tumblr that help to improve writing.

Tumblr Integration In Teaching And Learning Process:

This section was designed to elicit teacher trainees' perceptions on the effectiveness of Tumblr as a medium to improve students' writing skills. When the respondents were asked about the suitability of Tumblr, about three-fourths of them (73.3 %) disagreed with the statement "Tumblr is suitable for beginner writers only"; however, more than one-fourth of the respondents agreed that Tumblr is only suitable for beginner writers (see Table 4). All the respondents agreed that the students feel encouraged and motivated to write when they received comments and feedback on their blogs. Moreover, all the surveyed teacher trainees believed that Tumblr encourages brainstorming activity among students.

When the respondents were requested to express their perceptions of Tumblr in helping the students to organize ideas, the majority of them (83.3 %) believed that Tumblr helps students to organize ideas before they start writing and most of them (86.7 %) agreed that Tumblr gets students to be involved in creative and critical thinking. Moreover, almost all the respondents believed that Tumblr encourages independent learning especially outside of the classroom and it is an interesting and interactive medium to enhance writing skills among students.

Table 4: Teacher trainees' perceptions of the Tumblr integration in teaching and learning.

Statements	Strongly disagree + Disagree		Agree + Strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Tumblr is suitable for beginner writers only.	22	73.3	8	26.6
Students feel encouraged and motivated when they received comments and feedback on their blogs.	0	0.0	30	100.0
Tumblr encourages brainstorming activity among students.	0	0.0	30	100.0
Tumblr helps students to organize ideas before they start writing.	5	16.7	25	83.3
Tumblr gets students to be involved in creative and critical thinking.	4	13.3	26	86.7
Tumblr encourages independent learning especially outside of the classroom	1	3.3	29	96.7
Tumblr is an interesting and interactive medium to enhance writing skills among students.	2	6.7	28	93.3

The findings of this section can be grouped into 3 main aspects which are motivation, writing skills aspect and classroom learning aspect. It is obvious that Tumblr is suitable for beginner learners and for intermediate and advance learners as well. However, there are advantages for beginner learners because students can write short sentences in Tumblr. They do not necessarily have to write long sentences, but it depends on the students'

ability to write. Others also can help through giving comments and sharing ideas; therefore, students will feel encouraged to generate ideas to write longer.

The students will feel motivated and encouraged because they know their writing is read and acknowledged by others. The comments and feedbacks give some sorts of motivation to the students to write. Tumblr can get the students to be involved in creative and critical thinking because the students have the chance to state their point of view on any issue discussed by posting comments in the 'discuss' application. They can argue with their friends who post a topic, picture or video in the Tumblr. They also can 'reblog' post and add any interesting information creatively to the post they like.

Almost all of the respondents agreed that Tumblr encourages independent learning. Such a belief might refer to the students' interests because nowadays the students love to learn through technology on their own. They spend most of the time in front of the computer, and writing through Tumblr actually can encourage them to do independent learning outside of the classroom as long as there is internet access. It shows that learning is not limited only to the classroom. Moreover, the majority of the respondents agreed that Tumblr is an interesting and interactive application that enhances writing skills among the students. This belief might refer to the fact that this application provides interactive way of learning that attracts the students' interest to write in Tumblr.

The Usage Of Tumblr In Teaching And Learning:

The last section of the questionnaire included an open ended question to find the relevance of implementing Tumblr into teaching and learning process in the classroom context, especially in teaching writing skill. The respondents were asked whether they agree with the integration of Tumblr into teaching writing and how and why Tumblr helps or hinders improving the writing skill.

As Figure 2 shows, 77% of the respondents agreed with the integration of Tumblr into the classroom, while 23% believed that Tumblr is not suitable to be integrated into the teaching and learning process, especially in teaching writing skill in the classroom.

Is it relevant to integrate and implement the usage of Tumblr into the teaching and learning process in the classroom context, especially in teaching writing? Yes or no?



Fig. 2: Teachers' perceptions of integrating Tumblr into the teaching and learning process.

One part of the open-ended question elicited the teacher trainees' opinions regarding the relevance of implementing Tumblr as part of the teaching materials that can be used in teaching writing skill in the classroom. The majority of the respondents agreed that Tumblr is relevant to be implemented in the classroom and does help in teaching writing skill. Figure 3 shows the reasons behind the respondents' opinions. More than one-third of the surveyed teacher trainees (37%) stated that using Tumblr as a medium in teaching writing increases the students' learning motivation. This might be due to the features of Tumblr that help the students to get some inspiration and constructive feedbacks on their writings.

Besides, one-third of the respondents (33%) believed that Tumblr really helps in improving writing where students get to share ideas, thoughts and also some other materials in learning via sharing link. Moreover, Tumblr encourages students to do active brainstorming and helps in generating ideas regarding a topic of discussion among them. About one-fifth of the respondents (22%) pointed out that Tumblr enhances interactive learning in the classroom where students can participate actively in teaching and learning process, compared to the teacher-centered way of learning. Just 4% of the respondents viewed that the features of Tumblr help in improving writing, especially for beginner writers. With the same percentage of 4%, the respondents believed that Tumblr helps students to learn more new words and enrich their vocabulary knowledge.

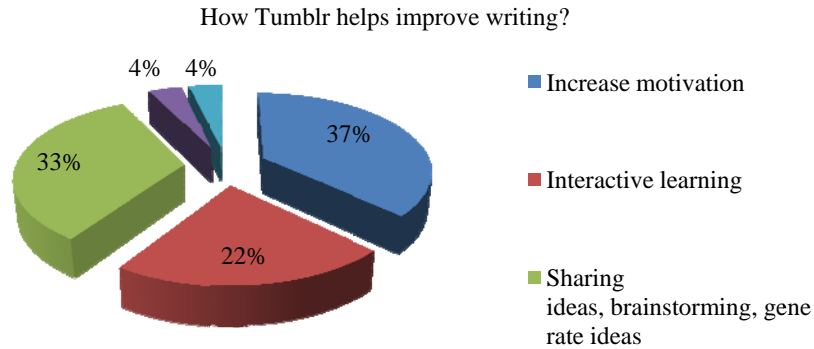


Fig. 3: Teachers’ perceptions of the ways Tumblr helps to improve writing.

On the other hand, in response to the open-ended question, some of the respondents stated a number of reasons that Tumblr should not be integrated into teaching writing skills. They believed that Tumblr is not a useful medium for teaching writing and is not suitable to be employed in the classroom as well. From the responses, five main reasons were extracted. First, among the opponents of using Tumblr in the classroom, less than one-third of them (29%) believed that students may get easily distracted with other features of Tumblr itself and some features of the Internet. Second, the same weight of responses (29%) showed that some of the schools are not well equipped with enough facilities such as computer labs and computers. Moreover, there is no guarantee that students in rural areas have access to internet. Furthermore, perhaps some students do not have the skills of using such technology as they do not have the facilities at home.

The next three reasons share the same weight of percentage. Among the opponents of using Tumblr, 14 % of them believed that Tumblr has simplified settings which are not much helpful in teaching writing. This is perhaps due to the features of re-blogging others’ posts and instant posting of pictures, quotes and so forth. These opponents think that some writing tasks should be involved in the process of teaching writing. Besides, some students or even teachers might have insufficient knowledge of Tumblr. As it is a new application, perhaps many people do not know how to use its functions and features. Thus, the limited knowledge of users regarding Tumblr could be a barrier preventing teachers to integrate it as an alternative in teaching writing skills. Moreover, some of the respondents stated that Tumblr may not be effective in teaching writing because students may use inappropriate language in their writing. The students will tend to use short forms of language, rather than standard language that should be used in an appropriate writing. Perhaps these opponents of using Tumblr feel that the usage of short forms of language will influence students’ writing skill in the future.

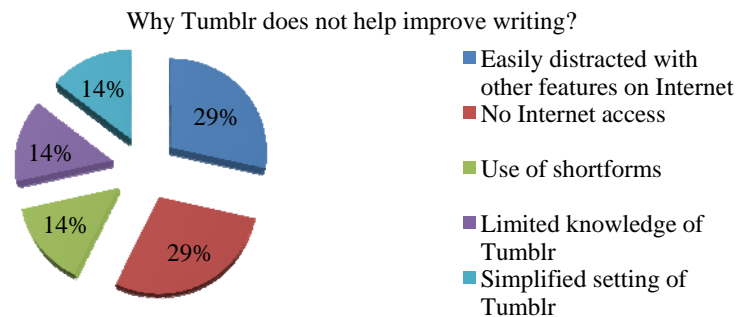


Fig. 4: Teachers’ perceptions of the reasons that Tumblr is not helpful.

Conclusion:

Tumblr is becoming increasingly popular for some reasons, most notably its accessibility to users and the important factor of community interaction. This paper aimed to examine the use of Tumblr as a medium to improve students’ writing skills and identify the factors which support the effectiveness of using Tumblr in the classroom. The majority of the surveyed respondents stated that Tumblr can be used as an effective medium in teaching writing and helps students in enhancing their writing skills. Tumblr helps students to organize ideas before they start writing and it gets students to be involved in creative and critical thinking. Tumblr also encourages independent learning especially outside of the classroom and it is an interesting and interactive

medium to enhance writing skills among students. The features of Tumblr can increase the students' learning motivation and help them to get some inspiration and constructive feedbacks on their writings. Tumblr also helps in improving writing where students can share ideas, thoughts and some other materials via sharing link. Moreover, Tumblr encourages students to do active brainstorming and helps in generating ideas regarding a topic of discussion among them. However, the limitations of Tumblr, for instance, the internet access which is not accessible in all places especially in rural areas, the tendency to get distracted by other things while online and teacher's lack of knowledge in technology caused the teaching and learning via Tumblr not really effective in some ways.

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