

Fusion of Technology with Language Learning: Blog Community

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings of an innovative teaching and learning tool which utilizes the weblogs or blogs to increase and widen the ESL learners' learning opportunities. It firstly reports on the implementation process of the online blogs community as a learning instrument in a tertiary-level ESL classroom. Secondly, it highlights the learners' feedback being a part of the online blogging community in order to help them enhance their mastery of the English language. The study which involved a select group of low proficiency learners in one Malaysian university utilized online blog discussion activities, interviews and reflection journals as data collection tools. An online blogging community was created and students participated in the group discussion for a duration of one semester. Qualitative analyses of the blog discussion content, interviews and students' reflection journals conclusively indicate that online blogging community activities, if done in an organized and structured manner, can widen students' learning opportunities beyond the physical classroom and provide a fresh and effective learning environment for the ESL learners to improve their command of the target language.

Keywords: ICT; Blended Learning; Tertiary-level; Blogs Community; ESL Learner

INTRODUCTION

Most ESL teachers or instructors worldwide commonly face the challenging task of designing and implementing the best way to teach the target language especially if the learners are of low language proficiency. However, one of the most recent and effective methods to teaching and learning English is by integrating or fusing technology as a pedagogical tool in the classrooms (Said Fathy El Said Abdul Fattah 2016, Munira Mutmainna 2016, Selami Aydin 2014, Emelia Rahman Sidek & Melor Md Yunus 2012, Blackstone et al. 2010, Nadzrah & Kemboja 2009, Wrede 2003). This is in line with the current development of information and communication technology (ICT) which has produced a new generation of learners who are more exposed to the digital and electronic worlds of various social media. With this recent advancement, this new generation of learners would thus prefer a different classroom environment, approach, and mode of learning. Hence, there is a need for language teachers to transform their teaching methods and techniques in order to meet the current learners' preference by blending technology and traditional face-to-face learning in their classrooms. What is more, the use of ICT especially to enhance language learning is increasingly gaining popularity and it is believed that blended learning would have an even greater role in the future (Graham, 2006). The availability of many Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tools on the Internet such as e-mail, discussion forums, face book, chat and blogs have served as valuable resources to many language teachers and has encouraged them to apply blended learning in their classrooms.

Among the CMC tools that is unceasingly making inroads into the classrooms is the weblogs or blogs which has been found to be useful and effective the world over (Munira Mutmainna 2016, Emelia Rahman Sidek & Melor Md Yunus 2012, Selami Aydin 2014, Blackstone et al. 2010) as a teaching and learning tool especially in the EL classrooms. In the area of learning resources, educators used blogs to provide students with a space to access useful information as well as discuss issues in their programs of study. Typical uses of blogs for teaching would include: (a) links to websites, (b) observations on learning content, (c) discussion forums, (d) learning resources, and (e) syllabi (Lengel, 2004). The use of weblogs or blogs involves traditional face-to-face classroom learning with an appropriate use of technology and online learning. Online learning via blogging can function as a facilitator in the learning process by providing learners with an autonomous environment that motivates them to learn on their own and take charge of their own learning beyond the physical classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

BLENDED LEARNING TO ENHANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Blended Learning can be defined as the incorporation of ICT technologies and online approaches with the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning approach in the physical classroom (Graham 2006). The notion of blended learning is realized by combining different modes of instructional models and students' learning style which are implemented in a structured and meaningful ways. The main aim is to create a novel and different environment in order to enhance students' learning outcome. Blended learning offers face-to-face and online delivery of educational content in order to provide more space and freedom for learners to enhance their own learning and allow for thoughtful reflection on their learning experience and processes (Manjot Kaur 2013).

Studies conducted in the past have proven the effectiveness of using the weblog or blogs to promote language skills such as reading or writing or self-reflection. (Sithaletchemy et al. 2013). Findings showed that blog writing facilitated and improved students' writing and reflection and that a well-structured online reflection can significantly enhance the quality of students' blog entries to a great extent. Blogging also help to build students' confidence level in expressing their ideas and opinions. It encourages students to do things that they are normally reluctant to do in the traditional face-to-face classrooms such as saying things or asking questions (Vethamani 2006). In one study which utilized blogging as a means to encourage students to write constructively (Nadzrah & Kemboja 2009) it was discovered that students perceived blogging as an interesting and motivating learning environment that help improve their writing ability. Other studies which incorporated the use of blogs in teaching reading and writing skills (Azizinezhad & Hashemi 2011, Bicen et al. 2010) have concluded that blogging could potentially develop multi-literacy skills such as communicative, intercultural as well as linguistic skills. Studies have also been conducted to examine the role of blogs writing in language learning in order to maximize students' collaborative writing activities (Du & Wagner 2005, Zaini Amir et al. 2011). Group blogging was found to be effective in instilling cooperation among peers when completing group projects. Where writing individual blog entries can be a solitary writing experience, group blogging can facilitate the process of writing the research project where completing the written report for a project can be exceptionally productive since learners will interact actively online with their peers in order to achieve a common aim. In other studies, researchers examined the role played by weblogs or blogs in improving writing fluency and vocabulary learning among

Japanese L2 learners (Fellner 2006). Among the language learning activities that they completed during the study were listening to and reading online materials as well as vocabulary building activities using blogs. It was discovered that, towards the end of the language learning program, the learners managed to increase the number of lexical items learnt by more than double the amount of the original number of words at the beginning of the program. Hence, it can be clearly seen that blending the learning approaches by using weblogs or blogs inside the classrooms can be an effective approach to complement the traditional face-to-face learning and can especially benefit the L2 or FL language learners in various ways.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Within the context of the present study, the majority of the ESL learners in the selected institution of higher learning are low proficiency ESL learners. Based on the researchers' personal experience teaching this group of learners, new, innovative methods of teaching and learning need to be incorporated in the classrooms in order to help these learners to be more motivated and interested in learning English as their second language. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of using blogs as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Specifically, it looks at how blogs as a social networking forum in an ESL classroom help students to develop their language proficiency and use the language during their social interaction with their peers. This study thus, seeks to answer the following research question: How can the use of weblogs or blogs help the ESL learners develop their learning in general and their target language proficiency in particular?

THEORETICAL BASIS

This study has adopted Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective on language acquisition and language learning (Lantolf & Appel 1994, Lantolf & Thorne 2006) as a theoretical basis for the design and implementation of the study. The sociocultural theory (SCT) of language learning believes that language learning is a social process where language proficiency develops through social interactions. Thus, language learners must be given the space and suitable environment where interaction opportunities are aplenty. For the purpose of this study, three of the key concepts in the SCT will be highlighted here since they provide the rationale for the design of this experimental study which integrates the use of technology in the language classroom. Firstly, learning is a mediated process and the learners use certain symbolic tools, which in this case is language, in order to mediate or facilitate their relationships with others (Mitchell et al. 2013). Consequently, language development takes place when learners interact with each other in order to complete a given task. This is where the creation of the blogs group or blog community can provide the avenue for the learners to use the language to communicate and interact with each other.

The second important concept is scaffolding which refers to the "process of supportive dialogue which directs the attention of the learner to key features of the environment, and which prompts them through successive steps of a problem" (Mitchell et al. 2013, p. 222). In other words, learners need to be given support or assistance when completing a given task or activity and this support can be in the form of verbal prompts, physical gestures, extensive dialogue or guided tasks. In this respect, the creation of the blogs group or community serves as the 'scaffold' that guide and support the activities or task that the learners need to complete as part of the process of learning the language. The blog community provides the space for the learners to practice using the language, share opinions and ideas, take control of their own learning and reflect on their learning experiences.

Finally, there is the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the domain of skill or knowledge where learning can take place most productively where the learner is not yet capable of autonomous learning, but can achieve the preferred result if given suitable assistance (Mitchell et al. 2013, p. 223). The traditional face-to-face learning may be more teacher-centred. But the blogging activities allow the learners to gradually learn how to complete the language tasks with minimal guidance from the teacher until they can be left on their own to be autonomous learners and eventually take control of their own learning.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXTS

This study was conducted at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia involving a selected group of 16 first year students with low English proficiency level in their first semester of study. They were all female students and doing various programs of studies at FSSH. These students enrolled in the English for Social Sciences Course (ESS) which is a compulsory course for them to attend and pass as a graduation requirement. Their level of English proficiency is determined by the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which employs a band ranging from 1- 6 with Band 1 student categorised as a poor user and Band 6 categorised as a proficient user. All these students attained Band 2 in the MUET.

THE ENGLISH FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES COURSE

The English for Social Sciences course (ESS) which is a compulsory course for all FSSH undergraduates is basically a general English proficiency course which aims to equip the students with listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English to help them to cope with the academic demand at the university. Students attend classes twice with a total number of 4 hours per week throughout the 14-week academic semester. The evaluation components of the course include a progress test, public speaking, face-to-face group interaction, an integrated project and a final exam. The integrated project (IP) requires students to conduct a mini research based on a select topic related to social sciences and humanities issues, and at the end they have to produce a written report and present the outcome of the research via oral presentation in class in the final week of the academic semester. To complete the IP, students are divided into small groups of three or four. Since 4 hours of face-to-face classes is insufficient time for the students and instructors to discuss the IP, the use of weblogs or blogs were introduced as one of the elements in the IP. By using blogs, the students had extended time to work on their project since they could conduct online group discussion and writing activities beyond the four walls of the classroom. There was no restricted or specific time that they needed to participate.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

BLOGS COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

The implementation of the blogs community and discussion activities were done in four major stages which included 1) formation of groups; (2) face-to-face discussion; (3) creation of group blogs; and (4) discussion on blogs (refer to Figure 1). The followings are the various stages mentioned.

STAGE 1 – FORMATION OF GROUPS

At this first stage, the students in the class formed their own groups. In forming of groups, students were given the liberty to select their own group members. The freedom was given to ensure that they could work well in the team in carrying the task. Most of the students selected course-mates who were in the same disciplines of studies based on familiarity and research interest. Each group consisted of 3-4 members. These groups would be the “blogging groups” for the online discussion.

STAGE 2 – FACE-TO-FACE DISCUSSION

The face-to-face discussion was conducted in class to discuss the project topic, project objectives and research questions. The project topic could be selected from the suggested topics given in the course file or based on a topic selected by group consensus. The learners brainstormed several topics related to area of social sciences. They were advised to think of current social issues that would be interesting to research on, for example “*The Impact of Social Media towards Students’ Writing.*” Once a topic was decided on, each group needed to obtain the approval from the lecturer. This practice was necessary to record and to ensure that each group would work on different topic and no similar topics were to be worked on by two different groups.

The next step of this stage was the discussion of the objectives of the research and the research questions. Each group was required to come up with research objectives and research questions related to the topic. The project objectives and the research questions would be the guides for online discussions and contributions at the later stage of the blogging process. The lecturer would assist groups in formulating the objectives and questions.

STAGE 3 – CREATION OF GROUP BLOGS

Upon completion of stage 2, each group then had to register and create the group blog. At this stage, the lecturer introduced several websites which host free blog hosting services. Some examples of hosting websites given were Blogger and blogspot.com. Hosting websites such as Blogger gave instruction or guidelines on creating a personal or group blog. These helped students who were blog novices.

Each group explored the hosting websites available and decided on suitable hosting website for them to register. Members of each group received a password and username once they have registered to ensure that only group members could assess the group blog. However, the groups were encouraged to share their group URL to other course-mates /groups to give them access to the group blog and enable them to participate in the discussion. Then as a group the students were to create or design their group blog creatively. They were also encouraged to select a unique or interesting group name. Each member would also write his/her profile and upload personal pictures on the group blog. The lecturer kept a record of all the group’s URL addresses for monitoring and assessing purposes. Each group blog discussion was to be monitored closely by the lecturer concerned.

STAGE 4 – BLOGS DISCUSSION

Once the project objectives and research questions were finalized and uploaded in their project blog, each member of the group was required to find reading articles, videos and information related to the topic selected. The related materials should be from different sources such as books, journals, newspapers, internet and magazines. The purpose of this requirement was to expose students to wider range of reading materials and sources. These materials would be the basis of the online discussions among the group members.

As soon as the group blog was set up, the group members would start to have the online discussion. Unlike the stage 2 face-to-face discussion, the online discussions were done outside class time and at the students’ free time. The groups posted the project

objectives and research questions as guides for online group discussions and contributions. At this stage, there were several elements of the blog activities which include: posting of individual knowledge on the topic, group members' feedback or comments on the individual's knowledge, posting of facts or materials on the topic, posting of opinions and finally views on the facts provided.

1. *Posting of individual knowledge on the topic.* The students shared what they know about the topic with the rest of the group members. The knowledge could be from personal experience or from readings.
2. *Postings of group members' feedback or comments on individual knowledge.* Members of the group were required to read the postings and respond to the shared information.
3. *Posting of facts or materials on the topic.* The students made entries/posts reporting of facts and information that they have gathered from the reading and search. They also posted their opinions or viewpoints on the facts, information or materials such as video clips, links and others.
4. *Posting of opinions and views on the facts.* The students would then express their opinions and views on the facts shared by members.

In this stage, there were several challenges that were observed during the implementation of the blogging discussion activities;

1. Lack of participation from the group members.
2. Difficulty in accessing the group blogs
3. Lack of discussion on the facts/ just postings of facts without discussion.

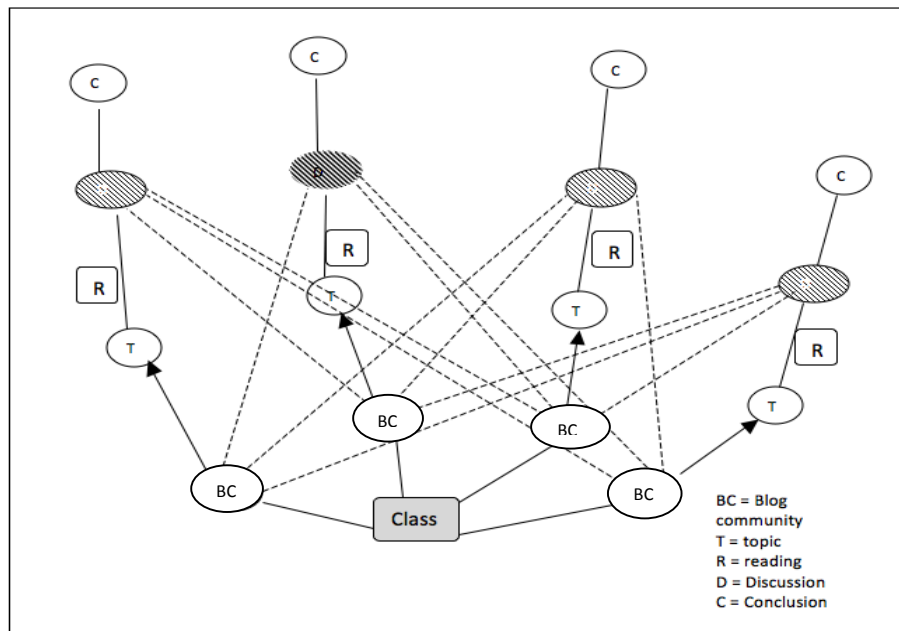


FIGURE 1. Online blog community discussion pattern

Monitoring of the students' participation in the blogging activities was crucial in this stage. Instructors had to access the group blogs and monitor the participation of the group members. Instructors would post questions or comments to inactive students on the group blog.

JOURNAL ENTRIES

The learners were required to record their learning activities in their journal every week throughout the 14 weeks. The aim is for them to express and reflect their thoughts and feelings regarding learning English via the blogs discussion activities. Data from the journal entries had allowed the researchers to capture the students' learning patterns, the problems they faced while blogging and the steps they took when completing the task. Since language is not the focal part of this study, students could record their thoughts in either Malay or English language. Most students code-switched between these two languages when writing their journal entries.

INTERVIEWS

A focus group interview was conducted at the end of the semester after the course was completed to investigate the students' attitudes, perceptions and opinions on the use of blogs for their language learning. The interview questions were developed based on the students' reflections in the learning diary and the face-to-face communication in the classroom. The interviews, which lasted about 45 minutes, were conducted separately for each blogs group in the blog community (BC). This approach allows space for each student to express his/her opinions freely. Students were given a choice to answer in the Malay language or English to express themselves and give opinions. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. The Malay language transcriptions were translated into English for reporting purposes.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from the blogs discussion activities, the journal entries and interview sessions were analysed qualitatively. The journal entries and interview transcripts were read and then re-read in order to identify the recurring themes. Themes such as the learning process, self-learning, self-awareness, motivation, autonomy and others were identified from the interview data. The blog discussions contents were examined in order to understand how knowledge is shared, transferred and discussed and how these activities had affected the way students learn English.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data from the various research tools have revealed several interesting findings about the various ways the blogging discussion activities had enhanced student' language learning skills as well as their perceptions of the use of online discussion forum such as blogs to help develop their mastery of the English language. Figure 2 below provides a snapshot of the major skills or knowledge areas which the students perceived they have developed further after participating in the blogs discussion activities.



FIGURE 2. Areas of Skills Improvement as Perceived by the Students

In order to gauge the students' level of computer literacy and blogs usage, questions were asked during focus group interviews. Responses indicated that all of them were familiar with blogs. However, only four of them had their own personal blogs and the rest had learned how to create a blog during the period of this study.

Generally, all students indicated that the blog community provides an alternative for them to communicate in English, especially those who were very shy and afraid to make mistakes in front of others. One student indicated that even though she made mistakes when writing in blogs, she could still learn. This is because she could learn from comments given by her friends. In fact the activities motivated her to participate more frequently in the online discussion. As stated by her,

G1S2: klu dalam blog tu kita boleh belajar benda. Kalau buat salah saya cuba juga nak buat, sebab ada komen, mereka akan betulkan lah apa yang salah
(...if in blogs we can learn things. If I make mistakes I will still try to do it because in comments they (her friends) can correct the mistakes.)"

Apparently, the students also managed to reduce their writing anxiety when doing so on blogs since the blogs environment provided them with a non-threatening learning atmosphere where no one is watching them. When this occurs, they were even more willing to participate in the discussion and to learn on their own. As highlighted by one of them,

G1S4:bagi saya jika kita gunakan blog, jika kita salah orang tak tengok kita, ok lah buat aja, tulis aja apa kita tahu walaupun kita tahu ayat nya salah..
(when I write in blogs, when I made mistakes others won't see us, it is ok I just write what I know, even though I know the sentence is wrong...)
G2:...boleh mengeluarkan idea-idea baru dalam blog. Kalau dekat depan tu kita macam malu nak mengeluarkan idea tapi kalau dalam blog ni ada kawan nak cakap jadi boleh keluarkan idea baru, kawan ada yang sokong, ada kawan tu yang tak sokong. Kalau berhadapan tu malu sikit. Dalam blog ni terbuka...
(...can produce new ideas when writing in blogs. When discuss in front (face-to-face), we feel ashamed to construct ideas, but in blogs there are friends to express our ideas. Some friends agree with us; some don't. If in front, I feel a bit ashamed. Blogs is more open.)

Data from the journal entries indicated that the learners had managed to learn new skills or knowledge such as learning how to create their own blogs and develop their existing skills in several areas.

LEARNING HOW TO CREATE A BLOG

It is enlightening to know that through the ESS course project and the blogging activity, learners learnt to create and build their own blogs. Some learners who were unfamiliar with blogging had obtained help from their friends in advance for the purpose of completing the project.

LD 34: *First of all, actually I don't know how to build blog but after taken English Science Social courses, I can build my own ur group blog.*

LD 39: *The others friend has to helped we to created that blog. Actually, we all don't know how to created that. When my friend teach for we how to created the blog, we all already know now.*

BLOGGING IMPROVES VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is the building block of a language. Thus, it is heartening to discover that the learners in this study managed to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and consequently develop their language skills. The following excerpts testify to this,

LD 13: *Dalam blog juga aku dapat belajar perkataan baru dalam B.I. kalau x kerana penulisan blog x mungkin aku dapat tau maksd perkataan-perkataan itu..For example: household = rumahtangga*

LD 40: *From this blogger, I think, I can improve my vocabulary in English, because when I do a comment, I must find the meaning of words.*

LD 46: *For translate this information I use many way, for example I use dictionary, www.cit.com and electronic dictionary. Then, I write in my blog after I translate from bahasa Melayu to English.*

BLOGGING ENHANCES SELF-CONFIDENCE

Students also indicated that by blogging they have acquired the confidence to write and speak in English. They felt comfortable giving opinions and also felt less pressured and less embarrassed as the discussions were done online instead of face-to-face. As illustrated by the excerpt below,

LD 29: *I feel excited to write blog. This is because I dared to write than to speak in Inggeris. This is because I am afraid to communicate in BI because shame and fear to laugh by friend. So I think my blogs help me to express idea.*

LD 30: *Day by day I think I can start to speak in English better than before. I think with share and make arguing (debate) about something can improve ourself to thinking and learn us to give our opinion without feel embarrassing and feel more confident.*

BLOGGING IMPROVES WRITING SKILLS

It also can be seen that blogs as a teaching and learning tool can function as a novel and effective writing platform for the learners to practice and develop their writing skills in English. According to students,

LD 26: *But, anyway I learn something to write better in English.*

LD 26: *My private opinion is a blogging is useful to practice writing skills in English.*

LD 29: *when I writing a blog, firstly I must be make a sentence in a paper before post the comment because my English very bad. So I need work hard to open a dictionary and make the sentence.*

BLOGGING IMPROVES READING SKILLS

Having to share ideas, knowledge and opinion on the blogs not only provides students the opportunities to improve their writing skills but also their reading skills. Reading articles related to their research topic indirectly made them practice their reading skills such as skimming, scanning, finding main points and making conclusion. As emphasized by a few of them,

LD 30: From my reading about this, I get a new information and learn something. I learn how to read, make a conclusion and also give opinion when I'm read the data of statistic. Now, I can do it!

LD 39: I highlight the point about the reason, history, meaning and way to overcome bullying. I do that because to share the information in our group. It also help me to improve my reading and writing skills.

DISCUSSION

The development of language in this study took place when the students were actively involved in social interaction as highlighted in the sociocultural theory of learning (Lantolf & Thorne 2006). For example, when the students discussed the content of the project work online, they managed to add new knowledge that they gained from their readings to the knowledge that they already possessed. Learning takes place socially when there are active dialogues that direct the learner to learn the target language directly or indirectly.

Furthermore, the authentic, stress-free learning environment experienced by the students had given a lot of opportunities for them to learn the language incidentally. In other words, students acquire the language much faster if they are provided with a space where they can use the language freely without any pressure from the teachers. Interactions among peers lead to peer feedback and peer support which promotes learning and this reflects the concept of scaffolding in learning (Vygotsky 1978). The learners rely on each other to complete the activities. If they are able to interact actively and productively, learning can take place incidentally.

In the blog community, the knowledge is shared and learned together. New learning takes place when one receives feedback from other group members. However, shared-learning can be more effective when all group members participate and contribute in the discussion or feedback. Besides, if the feedback given is discussed in groups, the discussion can further develop students' critical thinking ability. Language knowledge, vocabulary and sentence structures can be acquired by all group members as the writing activities during the discussions in blogs can be seen/read and this will eventually lead to further incidental learning.

CONCLUSION

The use of weblogs or blogs as one of the pedagogical tools in the language classroom has proven to be effective in helping students develop their L2 skill. As opposed to the traditional face-to-face learning, the students who participated in this study were found to be quite productive in the discussion activities, something that can seldom be found in the face-to-face environment. Blogging provides students with a personalized, student-centered learning atmosphere that could help them to be independent or autonomous learners. Blogs are also approaches that the teacher should consider in the teaching of the English language as blogs

help and motivate students to develop their language skills. The findings of this study has proven the accuracy of the belief about L2 acquisition or learning as proposed by the sociocultural perspective theorists (Lantolf & Appel 1994, Lantolf & Thorne 2006, Mitchell et al. 2013). The ESL learners seem to make positive progress in their mastery of the target language even though it is at a small-scale level, when they participated in social interactions with their peers rather than learning the language by themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Research Fund provided by UKM-PTS-055-2009.

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