Benefits of using Web 2.0 Technologies for English Language Learning: Gifted Students’ Perception

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Abstract: The study aims to investigate the benefits of using Web 2.0 technologies in English language learning (ELL) based on the perception and experience of gifted students. The study employed a mixed-method approach, whereby a close- and open-ended questionnaire was used, in addition to semi-structured interviews. 80 Form 5 gifted students from the PERMATApintar National Gifted Center, UKM, Malaysia’s gifted school, were respondents for the questionnaire, while 4 were individually interviewed. The findings showed that gifted students felt that the Web 2.0 made ELL interesting and provided an English language environment online that enhanced their learning. The use of the technology also increased their confidence and allowed them to exchange feedback on their language. The notion of “virtual critics” also facilitated gifted students’ self-evaluation of their own language. Thus, educators should make use of the benefits that gifted students experience in using Web 2.0 technologies for more meaningful ELL.

Key-Words: Gifted education; Web 2.0; benefits; gifted learners; English language learning; perception

1 Introduction
The dawn of the age of the Internet has provided much excitement, even in the field of education. In an effort to jump onto the bandwagon, the Ministry of Education as well as the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia have voiced their support for teachers to use ICT and Internet platforms to assist the teaching and learning process at all levels [1]. With the advancement of the technology age, the way in which students learn has changed, shifting focus from the teacher to the student as the one who controls the learning process. Learners are active participants in the learning process rather than merely passive recipients of knowledge [2].

There are progressively more studies investigating the use of Web 2.0 technologies for English language learning (ELL), demonstrated by the surge of interest even in the past few years. The benefits of the Web 2.0 for ELL are certainly of interest [3]. Web 2.0 tools like Facebook, a social networking site, has been shown to possess great potential for ELL [4] as do wikis [5]. They promote interaction and collaboration among learners that are not possible elsewhere. Godwin-Jones [6] believed that tools that enhance communication and human interaction, have a great potential to be harnessed for language learning. Specifically in a multicultural setting like Malaysia, the use of ICT also poses great benefits in aiding the achievement of educational goals and objectives [7]. However, the question arises as to whether gifted individuals have similar Web 2.0 experiences in ELL as their non-gifted peers. As gifted individuals, they possess learning capabilities and personalities that are different. What benefits of using Web 2.0 technologies for ELL do they perceive?

2 Benefits of the Web 2.0
The Web 2.0 allows for more exposure to the target language. Podcasts exposed students to the language both at home and at school, increasing encounters with the target language [8]. However, there are concerns over the appropriateness of the materials students are exposed to, where not all videos are school-appropriate [9].
Nevertheless, the computer and online environment seems to benefit students. Learners using instant messaging (IM) are more comfortable, advanced and proficient in writing (or typing) than orally[10]. They also contributed more on social networks like Facebook (FB) and preferred writing on computers [4]. However, learners were not as familiar with technology as expected [11].

Using technology for ELL also enhanced students’ language skills and aspects. Reading performance was improved[11]. However, it was also found that the students’ reading skills did not improve significantly [12]. On the other hand, writing skills improved using blogs [11]and FB [1]; and impressively, learners were able to differentiate writing styles [13].

Web 2.0 technology also increases student motivation and interest. Students enjoyed writing and reading blog and motivated them, while social network reduced pressure on making language errors [1]. Other studies demonstrated positive effects on students’ motivation to learn [14]. However, there is a risk of the initial novelty wearing off and students losing motivation [15]. Nevertheless, students’ confidence in the language increased when using the Web 2.0. Such confidence could come from being comfortable in communicating using technology[12]. Self-esteem was raised due to a larger readership [16]and participation also increased especially from introverted students [1].

Web 2.0 technologies also allowed for more meaningful interactions. There is increased interaction and rapport between learners [12]. They built a sense of belonging to a community [11]. These tools served also to enhance the often-neglected communicative competence of learners [17]. Strangely, learners seemed unable to connect their “social life” and their ELL. Students consider the writing on an online platform as “communication”, but not “writing” which is related only to academic genres [18].

A unique feature of Web 2.0 is that it allows the exchange of feedback. The tools were found helpful in exchanging opinions and ideas, resulting in a valuable peer review culture [16]. Students even preferred peer comments than the teacher’s as it matched their level of ability [5]. However, students were actually dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of peer comments [5].

Besides that, studies have found that high ICT skills are not necessarily needed to contribute[19]. However, learners also fall victim to user errors and site malfunctions, slow Internet speed and other technical problems. There is also growing concern for Internet safety and ethics where social networks provide learners with a false sense of privacy, putting them at risk[20].

The perception of gifted individuals, in particular, on the benefits of using Web 2.0 technologies for ELL based on their personal experience were investigated in the PERMATApintarNational Gifted Center, UKM, Malaysia’s gifted school. In this paper, the researchers focused on students’ perceived benefits of using four types of Web 2.0 tools: instant message software (IM), blogs, social networks and video-sharing sites. It is hoped that this paper will give an idea of what gifted students find the Web 2.0 useful for.

3 Method
The study aimed to investigate gifted students’ perceived benefits of using Web 2.0 technologies for ELL. Mixed methods were employed, involving a questionnaire with close- and open-ended items, and semi-structured interviews. A total of 104 questionnaire surveys were distributed during the first two weeks of January 2012 to all Form 5 gifted students from the PERMATApintarNational Gifted Center; however only 80 were returned (return rate of 76.9%). The questionnaire respondents consisted of 26 males and 54 females (32.5% and 67.5% respectively). All respondents are aged between 16 and 17 years. 83.8% were Malays, 10.0% Chinese, 3.8% Indians, and only 2.5% East Malaysian bumiputeras. Each respondent was coded Rs01, Rs02 and so on. For the semi-structured interviews, 4 voluntary gifted students were selected. Each was given pseudonyms(Acap, Rania, Penguin and Annie) in addition to codes (Ri1, Ri2 etc.).

4 Findings and Discussion
There are many benefits of using Web 2.0 tools for ELL. However, what are the benefits that gifted students experience when using them? From the data, the Web 2.0 makes for interesting learning, provides an English language environment, the presence of “virtual critics”, improves language aspects and skills, increases confidence of learners, and receiving feedback.

4.1 Interesting Learning
ELL using Web 2.0 tools is a welcome alternative to the typical classroom method. Materials on the Web 2.0 have more graphics, are more colourful and are sometimes integrated with sounds and audio (Rs06). Students seem uninspired by what is usually done in English language classrooms. Students felt that the conventional way of teaching was too dull (Rs59) while the Web 2.0 was more interactive (Rs78). Acap also agreed that the conventional way of teaching and learning in the classroom is very dull. He harped on the fact that using Web 2.0 tools makes ELL more fun, as well as a stress relief. He watches his favourite videos on YouTube, following the latest updates. However, he claimed that it is not always fun and games. He also learns and improves on his pronunciation from watching the videos. When learners are interested, they become more motivated to learn, as shown in previous studies [4].

4.2 English Language Environment
An English language environment facilitates ELL because students are immersed in the language. This is essential for ELL, especially in an ESL context like Malaysia. These Web 2.0 tools provide just that, since the Internet is generally an English environment (Rs15). In order to improve, students need to be constantly exposed to the language, then to constantly practise it. Penguin illustrated during the interview, “...I think, environment’s very important. Like, when people around you, and your blog, your Facebook, your Twitter in English so it encourage you to just speak in English. Just enhance your vocab like that” (Penguin, Ri3). This is also supported by the literature whereby the Web tools increased opportunities for students to encounter the target language[8]. Rs71 stated that, “We can get used to the language as we always used it.” Not only are learners exposed to the language, they are also exposed to good and proper language, as standard English is used (Rs66). However, this may not always be so. In order to convey the message, accuracy of the language is often neglected, whereby grammar is compromised (Rs 19) and broken English is used (Rs 24).

On the other hand, using the Web 2.0 does not guarantee a fully-English language environment. The online environment is dependent on its users. Learners may be eager second language learners, but nothing beats the comfort and ease of the mother tongue. Acap admitted, “[I use mainly] Malay. Yeah, I thought of writing in English, but...I can’t express myself in English.” Ultimately, it is a challenge to establish a pure English language environment online due to students’ tendency to use their first language.

4.3 Improves Language Aspects and Skills
The learners also expressed how using Web 2.0 tools for ELL improves language aspects like vocabulary and grammar, as well as the four language skills. Interestingly though, a student mentioned that she is not just able to increase vocabulary, but also to “add my vocab frequently” (Rs12). Students also believe that interaction with native speakers is a positive step towards bettering their language, and the Web 2.0 offers that opportunity (Rs50). However, the language used by native speakers may not be at a suitable level for learners, and hinders understanding. Rs28 stated, “There are some bombastic words used by the owner of the blogs.” Even though it is a challenge, students do feel they can learn from it, for example, in pronunciation, even from music videos (Rania, Ri2). Other than that, using Web 2.0 tools sharpens students’ language skills, which include reading, writing, speaking and listening in the language. What is more, learners’ communication skills are improved by exposing them to daily life communication in English. Communicating and interacting in English may be an entirely new ballgame for some. Web 2.0 tools assist students to not just socialize, but to do so in the target language (Rs73).

4.4 Virtual Critics
A fascinating idea that arose is the notion of “virtual critics”. Learners feel that fellow users of the Web 2.0 tool or the Internet would scrutinize and subsequently criticize them for any language errors they make; hence, a sort of “virtual critic”. It is possible that gifted learners’ perfectionist attitudes [21] contributed to the emergence of this notion since their obsession for perfection would make them more conscious of other users scrutinizing their language, and more intolerant of making mistakes. In order to reduce errors made on an open platform like the Web 2.0, they constantly check for language mistakes. Rs04’s response illustrates this notion: “Since whatever I post in FB/blog is public, I often to check my grammar and vocabulary before I use it.” Penguin also demonstrates this: “If I write a post and before I want to publish it, I will check if I do something wrong. Cos it will embarrass me…So I will make sure that…I don’t have any mistake” (Penguin, Ri3). Gifted learners appear to be more concerned with error-avoidance. They are basically self-evaluating their own language production which is one of the strategies employed by successful language learners.

4.5 Increases Confidence

Web 2.0 tools allow interaction with other users who are really strangers. This, somehow, becomes a confidence booster for students to use the language. Rs11 elaborated, “It makes me feels more confident to speak English especially with people who doesn’t know me.” Penguin supplemented this view by saying that she felt more comfortable to use the language because there was no face-to-face interaction. This seems to benefit students who are shy and introverted, or those who are self-conscious about their poor language proficiency. Although speaking in English may still be a work in progress, at least writing in English is possible for these learners. Other studies also reported a boost in the learners’ self-esteem and confidence [12] from the use of Web 2.0 tools like blogs, and therefore, the findings verify what was previously discovered. The findings are also in line with results of past research where there was an increase in student participation by learners who did not often speak up in class [1]. Rania, on the other hand, finds that she gains confidence to speak English from imitating the speakers in videos, where the videos act as speech models. The large number of subscribers and viewers on a certain user’s YouTube channel convinces her to emulate their speech.

4.6 Receive Feedback

The interactive nature of these Web 2.0 tools allows instant and continuous feedback for learners. Students are able to request for, and receive feedback on their language performance from other users. Other users give opinions and even encouragement for learners to practice the language learned in English lessons (Rs11). Users who are practically strangers also offer to correct students’ mistakes (Annie, Ri4). On the Web 2.0, it is found that learners do provide feedback to one another [16]. The literature, however, showed that some do not comment at all on other learners’ language progress [13].

Yet, a concerning issue that arises is whether the input or feedback received from other users are accurate and constructive. Bates [22] questions if learners are able to differentiate reliable and accurate information from biased, inaccurate information if they are left to meander on the Web 2.0. If inaccurate language is prevalent on the Web 2.0, who is to say that users who provide feedback to the learners are any better? Though the ability to request for and provide feedback on Web 2.0 tools is valuable indeed, the quality and the validity of the feedback received is not guaranteed. Moreover, users can be harsh and overly critical, and may damage a learner’s self-esteem and ultimately discourage them from attempting the language. This is particularly important for gifted learners who, being such perfectionists, may not take criticism too well.

5 Conclusion

The findings of the study have shown and validated what was previously found in the literature. Gifted learners do find that using Web 2.0 technologies makes for interesting learning, and is very much preferred to the “conventional” method of teaching. In addition, the Web 2.0 provides an English language environment which is vital for constant exposure to the target language especially in the ESL context. However, the online environment is still
dependent on the students’ and their resolution to communicate only in the target language. Besides that, using the technology also benefited shy students by increasing their confidence to use the language. It also indicates that gifted learners, too, are self-conscious about their language proficiency. The Web 2.0 also provided an avenue for learners to exchange feedback on their language performance. However, the quality and validity of the feedback is questionable. Interestingly, the notion of “virtual critics” seems to be unique to gifted students due to their perfectionist characteristics. They are more mindful of other users scrutinizing their language production, and more intolerant of errors. This indicates that they self-evaluate more, which is a trait of a successful language learner. Therefore, educators should exploit the perceived benefits of Web 2.0 technology for gifted students’ ELL in order to further enhance their learning and potential for greatness.

References:


