

Investigating The Use Of Social Networking Tools In Improving Students' Grammar: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The qualitative study is conducted to identify how using emails as a social networking tool can foster and improve students' grammar. This study employs a case study method as it could investigate new phenomenon within its real context. The samples of this study consist of five secondary school students from Penang. The instruments used in the data gathering process are threads analysis and semi-structured interview. Data is triangulated to justify the learning of grammar among the students. The findings showed notable improvement in the acquisition of grammar among the study respondents. The data also indicate that there is improvement in the motivation level and students are actually having fun using emails in their English classes.

Keywords: Social networking tools, emails, grammar, present progressive tense

INTRODUCTION

Of late, the declining standard of English language, especially on the acquisition of grammar, has put a dent in the measures taken by the Ministry of Education to uphold the standard of English (Sharier & Anton, 2010). Students are no longer able to use grammar effectively and proficiently. This is due to the fact that English is taught for communication purposes and the focus on grammar is not being highlighted as much as when the syllabus was still grammar-based. The Minister of Education expressed his dismay over the fact that students are not able to differentiate between words such as 'pain' and 'painful' (The New Strait Times, 2009). In order to upgrade the standard of the English language in Malaysia, the Ministry of Education has come up with the program of 'Upholding Bahasa Melayu, Strengthening the English Language'. In terms of learning grammar, it is found that students are not able to differentiate between simple present tense and present progressive tense. Such difficulties may contribute to misinterpretations. Teachers often find that many students are still unable to use the correct tenses while writing and speaking in the English language (Kosur, 2010). Students are not motivated to learn when teachers resort to traditional methods of teaching (Mohd. Hilmi and Dourado, 2010). Therefore, to improve the proficiency of English, new pedagogy and teaching methods need to be introduced in the classroom.

Information Communication and Technology (ICT) particularly the Social Networking Tools (SNT) has provided many benefits to the education fields. The teaching and learning process becomes more engaging and interactive with the utilisation of the ICT in the classroom, especially in the facilitation of improving students' language proficiency (Cooze & Barbour, 2005; Lee & Chong, 2008). SNT comprise of two modes: asynchronous and synchronous. Synchronous tools allow users to "to have real-time written conversation and (is) originally developed to teach English composition and literature to native speakers of English" (Liu, et.al., 2003). Asynchronous tools, on the other hand, allow students time to think and ponder in depth before responding.

Email is an asynchronous tool which helps to decrease concern about students' lacking proficiency in the target language (Kupelian, 2001).

Using email is seen to be a good alternative activity to develop the students' language competency (Dudenev & Hockly, 2007). In addition to that asynchronous activities via email can enhance English language skills, be it in written or oral form (Warschauer & Shetzer, 2000). Therefore, it is hoped that the use of email would have the potential to enhance the learning of grammar. This study is conducted to investigate if using emails could foster the students' grammar learning and explore their experiences in using SNT in learning English.

THE STUDY

The study is based on Kim (2008) on using emails to enable 3E learning (Effective, Efficient and Engaging). The 3E learning emphasises on cognitive and non-cognitive elements. Non –cognitive aspects are interest, motivation, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and efficacy. On the other hand, cognitive aspects are recall, information processing, mental models and scaffolding. The combination of both aspects will help make learning more effective, efficient and engaging. Kim (2008) also said that by reducing the students' anxiety in learning grammar would inevitably gain students' interests and boost their motivation levels. In addition to Kim's (2008) 3E learning model, this study also incorporates the elements of constructivism learning theory in an online learning environment. The constructivist online learning theory advocates collaborative learning as well as student-centred approaches to be implemented

The main purpose of this study is to investigate if the learning of present progressive tense can be fostered through the use of emails. The study also aims at exploring the students' needs and interest in using ICT in their English classroom. The specific objectives for this study are:

- i. How does the utilization of emails help to foster the learning of present progressive tense?
- ii. What are the challenges faced by the students using emails in the learning of present progressive tense?

The study takes on the case study approach as it is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena (Merriam, 1988). This exploratory study is done to have an in depth understanding on how the utilisation of emails help to foster the learning of present progressive tense among primary school students. The study is conducted on five secondary school students from a rural school in Penang Island. The students are from Form One , of average ability and are purposely chosen for the study. The whole duration of the study is five weeks. The data was collected through content analysis (emails exchanges), observations and semi-structured interviews with all the respondents. Prior to the study, the researcher has helped the students to create email accounts for themselves before participating in the research. The research has also helped the students in showing them on how to use the basic tools of email such as composing and replying emails, attaching files, downloading files as well as sending, deleting and editing their files.

A teacher is also involved in the study. The teacher is trained to carry out the email activities and will be involved in the teaching and learning of the grammar items. All tasks are done through email exchanges. The teaching and learning are also done through emails. In the first email, the teacher introduces the grammar items learnt which is the present progressive tenses, through the explanations of forms and functions followed by the examples of usage in sentences. For the first 3 weeks, the students are exposed to the grammar items and they are also given reinforcement activities – all done via email exchanges. Feedback is given by the teacher as well as by the other respondents. Every email exchange will have to be forwarded to everyone in the group and carbon copied to the teacher. At the end of the study, the students need to come out with a pamphlet describing the places of interest in the world. The students need to incorporate sentences describing these places using the present progressive tense. They were given two weeks to complete the task. While they are completing the task, the emails exchanges are still going on.

Findings and Discussions

The data derived from the emails analysis and interview sessions. The data are reduced and coded into different categories.

i) How does the utilization of emails help to foster the learning of present progressive tense?

The findings for this study derive from the emails analysis and interview sessions. The data are then reduced and coded into different themes. For this research question, the researcher employs the *a priori* method whereby the themes are pre-determined using Kim's E3 Learning elements (2008). The three categories proposed by Kim are efficient, effective and engaging. The results from the email analysis and interview showed that the emails can play a positive side in fostering the learning of present progressive tenses.

a. Efficient Learning

The learning becomes more efficient with the utilization of emails. The findings show that students are able to share the information they obtain and collaborate with their friends through email exchanges. In addition to that, the students are also able to interact with their teacher. The teacher provides almost immediate feedback, responding to the emails within 24 hours of receiving emails from the students. The learning becomes more efficient with the fast feedback, be it from the teacher as well as from the other respondents. Using emails has opened up opportunities especially for the introverted students who may be quite reluctant to ask face-to-face questions. Email exchanges also allow the students to ask or respond to queries in their own time, without having the time and space limitation as normal classroom does. Some responses from the students confirm this:

"It was truly an easy approach as I could send the subsequent task at my own pace but most importantly it is easier to get responses from my friends and the teacher. To me, learning is more efficient as there is no pressure to do certain things at certain time."

Respondent 2, Interview

The usage of email has made the students attain other relevant information pertaining to the task easily. For example, they could check their answers and edit their work while being exposed to the examples given by teacher on the grammar items. This is in tandem with the constructivist learning environment which advocates exploration and real examples to facilitate and make learning become more meaningful (Harman & Koohang, 2009).

"...we can use features in emails called spelling checker to check our spelling on the words we used in the present progressive sentences..."

Respondent 1, Interview

"...besides helps me (sic) gaining knowledge of new words by using the present progressive tense. I also know how to use email..."

Respondent 3, Interview

It is interesting to note that the students have developed valuable skills through exchanging emails in learning grammar. The ongoing tasks should improve in terms of the comprehension of the forms and functions of the learnt grammar items. Findings also illustrate that at the end of the study the students are able to use the present progressive tenses correctly and that they are able to differentiate between present progressive tenses and other tenses. This finding is in line with the characteristics shown in the constructivist learning approach whereby knowledge construction is emphasized and students are provided with the opportunity for authentic learning where there is an increasing complexity of tasks, skills and knowledge acquisition (Murphy, 1997 cited in Koohang, Riley, Smith & Scheurs, 2009).

b. Effective learning

Using emails in learning make learning easier and more effective. Students have the freedom to refer and discuss with their teacher and their friends whenever they encounter difficulties in learning the present progressive tenses. The vignettes below illustrate the findings:

"...It is because I can learn new words and if I don't understand I can ask the teacher without have to be in school to do that..."

Respondent 1

"...The features like spelling correction system can contribute to the effective learning process of present progressive tense..."

Respondent 4

"...faster pace of learning...understand the lesson well and it is easier to do the flyer..."

Respondent 5

The use of emails highly motivated the students to learn about the grammar items. They do not feel bored and stressed as they see it as an interactive activity that does not put a lot of pressure on them to perform. The students feel that the teaching through emails makes learning the present progressive tense uncomplicated and easier.

"Through the task given by using email, I feel that it has really improved my usage of present progressive tense..."

Respondent 3

"...when you want to type and email somebody you must use the present progressive tense in your email so this encourages you to use it more and practice..."

Respondent

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"...it can be effective like when I attempt to use the present progressive tense when writing emails to my family member so in a way it can improve my English..."

Respondent 1

From the above vignettes, it seems that students can easily grasp the knowledge if the teaching and learning is effective and efficient. As cited by Timucin (2006), the only instance in which the teaching and learning of grammar can result in language acquisition is when the students are engaged and interested in the subject. Emails covers student-autonomy value, inspires student-centered interactions, resulting in greater personal and expressive use of language (Mansor, 2007).

c. Engaging learning

The researcher notices that the utilization of emails is well accepted by the students because it offers something different from the ordinary and it is fun, too. This definitely added the extra value in the learning of present progressive tense as the students are engaged and are more focused towards the task given.

"It helps me understand the present progressive tense by the task that the teacher gives ..."

Respondent 2

"...I think it makes us more focus on the task and by using the emails and other friends you can complete your work faster..."

Respondent 3

"...classroom can be noisy and distracting..Internet is much more quieter and can concentrate more..."

Respondent 5

Therefore, in designing activities, teachers should also be aware of types of students and this will help teachers to cater to different needs of students. Vinaagre (2005) posits that the learning experience should be enjoyable and engrossing and emails can be the starting platform to offer such qualities to the teaching and learning.

Shipton and Shipton (2006) have mentioned that learning grammar through the conventional methods will make the students confuse by the abstract concepts of grammar rules and their applications. The findings from this study has ,however, highlighted that infusing emails in learning ESL grammar can help in making students understand both the concepts and the applications as well as elevating the feeling of boredom every time a grammar lesson takes place.

d. Out of the ordinary

An approach that is totally out of the norm has made them very curious to know what other discoveries that they might come across in the process of learning the present progressive tenses. Thus, they are prone to explore new dimensions of instructions by themselves and very limited assistance from the teacher. Below are some excerpts that illustrate the findings:

"...an interesting and new way to study.."

Respondent 4

"...The email also is a new way to teach the pupils so pupils will feel fun to learn English..."

Respondent 1

The utilization of emails succeeded in fostering excitement in the students' excitement although learning this particular grammar item is a new lesson for them. The excitement propels them to become more focus and engaged in the task assigned. This finding is in line with Jonassen (1995) who advocates that learning needs to be active and authentic in order for it to be meaningful. When learning is meaningful, students will acquire the language faster and easier.

According to Zuwati (2005), the use of email could also promote meaningful and interactive discussions between the teacher and the students as well as among the students. She further elaborates that social networking tools are valuable to the language teaching and learning because these tools encourage and motivate students, promote autonomous learning as well as integrate the other skills needed in language learning. In addition to that, social networking tools are also capable of providing immediate feedback and allow self-paced learning.

It is observed that the students could share their thoughts with their peers via emails especially the introverted students who are reluctant to ask questions or share their ideas openly in face-to-face classroom. Having social networking tools such as the emails could allow the expansion of knowledge seeking and advocate individualized learning which prepare the students for the outside world and promote lifelong learning.

All of the respondents agree that using emails make the learning and tasks execution easier and effective as the students are not bound by time to complete the tasks in the classroom. The interaction is not confined and limited to the classroom. This is parallel to Gingerman and Bernard (2004) who agree that using email will allow the respondents to maintain close relationships with one another. Overbaugh (2002) adds that using emails in language learning could also result in an efficient way to communicate and interact with others.

Another prominent finding is that the students feel email could contribute to a faster pace of learning. This means that using emails will make them understand the grammar lesson easier and quicker. The students further iterate that the email exchanges offer them a conducive learning environment that enables them to start immediately on tasks given.

The different style of learning has resulted in a positive impact towards the students' learning of the present progressive tense. According to Petty, Johnston & Shafer (2004), using emails in learning grammar is able to provide more opportunities to enjoy the lesson and at the same time offer flexible access to the students. Students will have a meaningful learning process if they have more opportunities to interact with authentic, contextualized and linguistically challenging activities as well as materials in academic contexts (Kasper et. al, 2000).

ii) What are the challenges faced by the students in using emails in the learning of present progressive tense?

Although the above section highlights the benefits and advantages the students gain from using emails in learning grammar, there are also some challenges faced by the respondents while doing so.

Even though initially, the students claim to have knowledge and skills in using emails, surprisingly prior to the study it is found that 80% of the students do not know how to use the special features in emails, such as attaching and downloading files. The teacher spent a few lessons training them on the basic application tools of the emails until all of them are familiar with the applications. After the training and a few practices, the students have the grasp on using the applications in emails. Some of the responses from the respondents on the difficulties they face are illustrated below:

"...don't know how to attach photos and sometimes videos..."

Respondent 3

"... difficult to put pictures or songs, don't know how..."

Respondent 2

"...don't know how to change wordings..."

Respondent 5

Another challenge encountered by the students during the study is the sporadic interruption of Internet. As they are using broadband and wireless, the Internet reception is not fully reliable at times. However, this difficulty does not dissuade the students from learning and completing their tasks. From the responses of the students, the most challenging aspects of this study is familiarising themselves with the use on social networking tools in the learning process. This is due to two main reasons:

- a. grammar lessons are usually done in normal classroom through face-to-face interaction

Learning using the social networking tools or the Internet is a fairly new thing to the students. Most of the time, learning English is done in normal classroom. Thus, learning grammar is done mostly the conventional way. Although it take some time for the students to be familiar with ICT in English learning, once they are used to it, the students enjoy the lessons. They even express hopes that there will be more ICT based English lessons in the future.

"...it will be nice if English class will have more computers and Internet..."

Respondent 1

"...grammar will be easy to learn with emails and maybe other program like Facebook. Hope the teacher will teach English and use ICT in English lesson..."

Respondent 4

"...maybe once in a while we can use the computer to do English exercises..."

Respondent 2

"...better if other subjects also use Internet in the lessons, more fun..."

Respondent 5

- b. 60% of the students have never used emails for learning and acquiring knowledge purposes other than to access to Facebook as Facebook requires the member to have an email account. These students do not even check their emails once their accounts have been set up and they rarely use the emails as means of communication. As mentioned by Respondent 5 who says that *"I only had email to access FB and to play online games."* Therefore, this study has shown the students that there are so much more they could do in terms of learning using emails. Not only they gain knowledge by utilising email in the learning of present progressive tenses, they have also improved their ICT skills especially the basic email application skills. The students are now able to attach videos, songs and images in their emails.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the use of emails in fostering the learning of grammar – the present progressive tense. The respondents of the study are seen to produce high interest in learning grammar through email exchanges. Social networking tools can be valuable and beneficial assets in language learning if utilised properly and effectively. Teachers need to infuse ICT in the classroom so as to vary the teaching method and gauge students' attention. Doering, Hughes & Huffman (2003) have highlighted that infusing technology in the language learning classroom can reap benefit and add value to achieving learning goals, motivating learners and advocating learner autonomy, if executed correctly. This study has shown that students enjoy the online interaction.

The removal of time barrier also helps in providing an engaging, effective and efficient learning environment for the students. Despite the initial challenges faced by the students, the outcome of this study shows positive responses towards the infusion of social networking tools in ESL lessons. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to subsequently find ways to integrate ICT especially social networking tools in their ESL classroom as the tools will definitely help in making the teaching and learning of English more effective, efficient and engaging.

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