The Effectiveness of Using Blogs as an Independent Learning Tool to Develop Reading Skills for University Students

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Abstract
The emergence of web 2.0 technologies has created new opportunities and challenges in the field of second and foreign language learning. Among all web 2.0 tools, blogs can be considered the most well-known one. The present study was an attempt to determine the effectiveness of using blogs as an independent learning tool to develop students' reading skills. Blogs can be divided into three main types; teacher's blog, class blog, and learner's blog. Participants were 22 first level students in the English Department at Qassim Private Colleges in Saudi Arabia. The experimental group (N =11) used teacher's blog with an independent reading program, whereas the control group (N=11) didn't have any additional exercises. This program ran for two months during the second semester, 2014/2015. The   pre-posttest comprised two reading comprehension passages. Results of the *t. test* analysis revealed that using blogs yielded significant effects on students' reading skills, i.e. the experimental group outperformed the control group.
Keywords: blog , web 1.0 , web 2..0, learner's autonomy

Introduction
Teaching English as a foreign language could not be isolated or separated from the creation of web 1.0 and web 2.0. with the first generation of web 1.0 that is generally referred to as the "read-only Web" (Rubens et al., 2011) making content available online for viewing. There is no relation between the author or the publisher. Authors of the web generally write what they want others to view and then publish it online (Husain, 2013). Email represents the main tool between the author and the viewer to communicate through. There is a direct link between both of them. This creation of web 1.0 extended from 1997 to 2004. According to O'Reilly (2005), the concept of web 2.0 appeared in the first conference of web 2.0 when the web pioneers discussed the future of web 2.0.   With the evolution of web 2.0 generation, the social media begins to appear and dominate the internet applications.

Advantages of adopting web 2.0 in EFL teaching
As Warschauer and Grimes (2007) point out, millions of people now use Web 2.0 technology to facilitate online interaction , information sharing and online collaboration. Web 2.0 is the base for social applications like wiki, facebook, and blogs. As a consequence of these, Web 2.0 communications have become a central component of many students' daily and academic lives (McBride, 2009). Wwith the evolution of web 2.0, there was a paradigm shift; from   cognitive orientation to social orientation, from classroom contexts to naturalistic settings, and from L2 learning to L2 use. Web 2.0 gave the opportunity to both the teacher and the learner to face each other outside the classroom (Wang & Vasquez (2012). The learner could participate and   be independent. The results of the empirical research conducted by (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) revealed that Web 2.0 technologies offer language learners the potential for a collaboration-oriented and community- based learning environment (Antenos-Conforti, 2009). Wang & Vásquez (2012), summarized the main usages and applications through web 2.0 platform in the following figure.
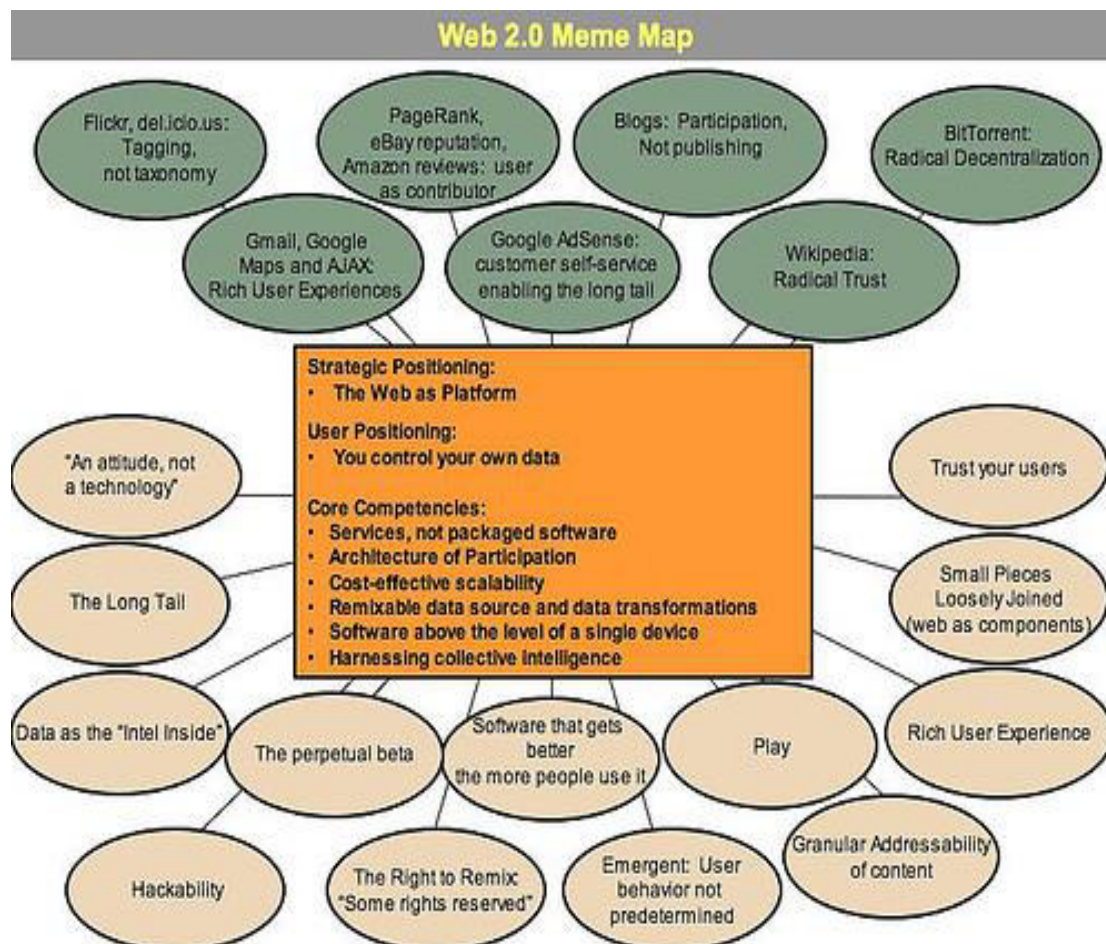
Figure 1: web 2.0 Meme Map Wang & Vásquez (2012)

Web 2.0 applications, interchangeably named social media or social technologies, are penetrating all aspects of life activities not only English language teaching classrooms. Web 2.0 application provide us with free service not costly software. They provide English language teachers with many tools available to them in their classrooms. Their students could send their home assignment through Gmail. They could download unlimited number of photos used inside their presentation through Flicker. In addition, their students could post their comments and exchange information through blogs.

Paull (2009) defined a Meme Map as a powerful and flexible tool for capturing, displaying and sharing memetic information   that   is a unit of cultural information, such as a cultural practice or idea,transmitted verbally or by repeated ac tion from one mind to another. Hence, Web 2.0 Meme map is a term that refers to the process of brainstorming about the usages of web 2.0. Adopting web 2.0 in EFL teaching can be summarized in the following main points;

1. Interaction, communication and collaboration between learners and teachers.
2. Ease of use and creation. Both of learners and teachers do not need to be professional in computer or web to create their own learning environment.
3. Inclusion all language skills. Teachers could develop their students' listening, reading, speaking and writing skills.

Blogs in language teaching

Blogs come from the web log. It is a kind of online journal, constructed and updated by the blog's owner. He\she can express his\ her feelings, ideas and thought in his own words. It is easy for most people to publish his own blog. It does not require knowledge in HTML or programming language. He\she can change the blog interface or add or change picture. Blogs are divided into three main types in the field of language teaching.

Blogs types

Campbell **(2003)** classified the following three types of blogs.

1. Tutor blog. It is created by the teacher. He can communicate with his students outside the class. He can give the learners daily reading practice. Tutor blog represents the gateway for learners to develop their language skills. In addition, it provides class with syllabus information.

2. class blogs. It is the result of the entire class. All students can participate in publishing the blog. Students could post their comments about common themes in class related to home assignment or inquiry about quizzes.

3. Learner's blogs. It is created by the learner to express about his personality. Students can develop their writing skills through expressing his daily routine. He writes and puts in his mind that his writing can be read by his classmates or friends.

Key characteristics of blogs

However, blogs could be used in many EFL fields, many students are not familiar with the tool. Therefore, the figure which was made by   Huann and et el (2007) shows the blog's potential.
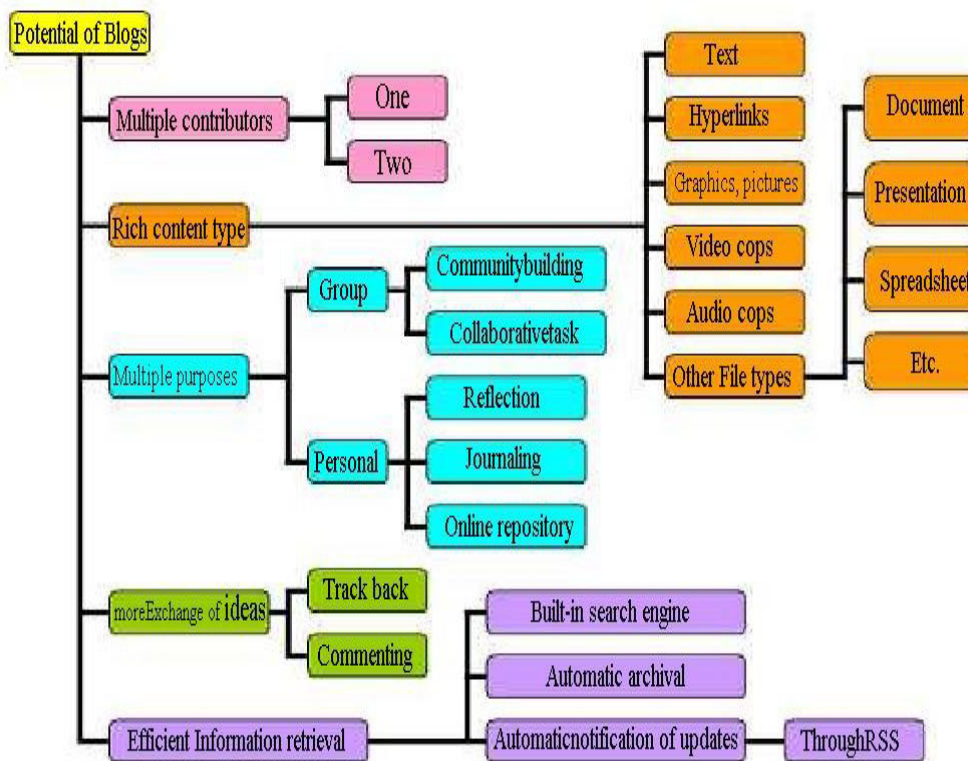

Figure 2: Huann and et el (2007) the blog's potential.

The blog's potential includes five main principles multiple contributors, rich content type, multiple purposes, more exchange of ideas and efficient information retrieval. and Content. Paquet (2003) reshaped the characteristics of blogs into the following five items:

1. Easy and free function
2. Personal editorship
3. Public access to the content
4. Archival features
5. Hyperlinked post structure (RSS)

   In addition to the aforementioned characteristics of blogs, the spread of web 2.0 technology and the speed of internet access lead to including blogs in language teaching.

Benefits of blog in language teaching

1. Provide an environment for students to develop their reading and writing skills.
2. encourage debate, critical analysis, and exchange of ideas and opinions.
3. Provide an environment for student's centered learning.
4. Encourage learner's autonomy.

Blog and learner's autonomy

Benson (2007) defines learner's autonomy as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning. Howard (2010) states that blog activities are one way of moving students from being dependent on their teachers during the class towards independent learning. When the learner feels that he is not able to do well in one language skill, he can depend on himself. However, it will be difficult   to leave them alone. Blogs is the way to achieve such independency.

Context of the Problem

Based on a pilot study conducted at the beginning of the second term 2014/2015 on the first level in English department, in Qassim Private Colleges. This pilot study consisted of two reading passages dealt with two different topics. The students did not perform well. They depended on their teachers in reading practice. They studied specific course reading book. Therefore, they did not think about being independent.

Statement of the problem

Thus, the study problem is identified in first level students' poor reading skill. In addition, it is not allowed in the college for extra teaching hours. Therefore, the current study attempted to develop these students' reading skills independently through using blogs. To reach this aim, the study tried to answer the following main question:

What is the effectiveness of using blog as an independent tool in developing students' reading skills?
    This main question is divided into the following sub-questions:
1- What are the theoretical bases of using blog in teaching ?
2- What steps should be undertaken for developing learner's independency?

Hypotheses of the study

Hypotheses comparing the experimental groups and control groups mean scores on the post test:
1- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental groups – using blog – and the control groups – receiving regular reading course – on the post-test in reading skill in favor of the experimental group.
2- There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre-test and the post-test in overall performance in grammar in favor of the post test.
3- There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental groups and the control groups in their final reading exam at the end of the term in favor of the experimental group.

Objectives of the study

The study attempted to use blog as an independent tool to develop first level students at QPC in reading skills.

Definition of Terms

Blog

Blogs has more than one definition, First, Ward (2004) defines blog as websites which are "updated regularly and organized chronologically according to date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards". Second, Throne & Payne (2005) defines blog as "a web application that displays serial entries with date and time stamps". Here in that research, it is in line with Throne & Payne (2005) definition for the blog.

Learner's autonomy

Benson (2007) defines learner's autonomy as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning.

Reading skills

Reading represents one of the receptive skills through which the reader could receive his knowledge about language. It is the ability to read text, process it and understand its meaning. Grabe (1991) defined reading as a cognitive process which involve a great deal of knowledge that is acquired by reader. Birch (2002) assured the role of reading practice till it happens automatically.

Related studies

With technology being accessible to the students and the teachers, blog and wiki as asynchronous applications seems as an effective tool for language class rooms. Blogs can be used to explore and reflect students' learning process , as well as interact with peers, teachers and content (Castaneda, Ahern, & Díaz, 2011). The related literature is divided into two main parts; blogs in teaching and learner's autonomy.

1. Blogs in teaching English

The benefits of adopting web 2.0 are reported in various researches recently. The most popular tools in these researches are blogs and wikis. Many studies attempt to investigate and compare the effectiveness of each tool. Below, studies that focus on the followings:

1.1. Effects of blogging and wiki in teaching

Behjat and et al, (2011) investigated the effect of using wiki and blog as interactive tools for teaching reading skills. The purpose of this study was to find which of these tools including wiki and blog can assist language learners. This treatment was conducted on 113 male and female students in Iran. The sample was divided into two groups. The first used blogs and the other used wiki. The results indicated that wiki is more effective to improve students' comprehension of English as a foreign language than blogs.

Fitzsimmons (2010) investigated the effectiveness of wiki and blogs on literature. The sample of this study consisted on twenty five students who utilized a classroom wiki an responded to literature via readers. The results revealed that communication through blogs was more enjoyable and beneficial for the students than blogs. In addition to that wiki is useful to the students than peer communication.

    In addition, after providing brief information about comparing the effectiveness of blog and wiki, blogs appeared as an effective learning tool in developing language skills, mainly reading and writing(Kennedy, K. (2003)., Richardson, W. (2003).Kajder, S., Bull, G. (2004).

1.2. Blogs and language skills.

Blogs could play an essential role through attaching files, pictures, texts, sound files and links. In addition, it has an effective role on students' performance in language skills. Moreover, Research shows that the use of blogs plays an important role in developing interactions among students and between teachers and students in the target language (Ayden 2014). Accordingly, **Murphy (2007)** asserted the role of feedback and interaction in online reading comprehension program. in addition to that interaction was promoted through pair work at a single computer and by providing feedback hints about the incorrect answer.

The findings of the further researches(Kajder, (2003), Kajder, (2004) Kennedy, K. (2003), Zehang, (2009) demonstrated that using blogs to promote writing skills has significant effects on students' performance.

In a similar vain, **Aydin (2014)** has reviewed the studies conducted on adopting blogs in developing language skills. He concluded that blogs are an effective learning tool that enhance language skills.

In addition, Izquierdo, B., & Reyes, L., (2009) investigated the effectiveness of blogs to promote frequent extra reading practice in a freshman EFL science and technology reading program at a public university. The results showed that online social environments were very well perceived by most students and that they are quite effective when students left their traditional classroom and explored new ways of learning outside.

2. learner's autonomy

Autonomy is defined as the learner's ability to learn on his own. Little, 1991, states that blogs could help promote learners' autonomy in four main areas. First, it encourages decision making. Students has the freedom to post, write , delete, add or change in his own blog. Second, it provides students with their responsibility over one aspect of learning. The students, through using their blogs, feel they have the documents and they are responsible for those documents. Third area is transferring and personalization of content, skills or language that has been more formally learned in the class. Blogs provide students with an opportunity to personalize language learned in class and other places and use it meaningfully. They will reshape their knowledge. Finally, blogs offer an opportunity for learners to reflect on the language they use in their blogs, the learning process, and the learning environment. Here, this research will mainly focus on this second area, taking their responsibility over one aspect of learning. The students are responsible for their reading skill. Yannuar, 2010, focused on a blog that was established independently and not as part of any language classroom, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Language Learning Blog, to develop learner's ability. Additionally, the results asserted that learner autonomy was developed when learners accessed the blog voluntarily, posted questions, and replied to teachers or other learners' responses. Balçıkanlı, 2010, investigate student teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in the Turkish educational context. It is recommended in the light of the findings that teacher educators should encourage their students to engage in out-of-class tasks like involving them in decision-making on the learning/teaching processes and employing portfolios and teacher logs for the development of practical knowledge and thinking operations. Therefore, it is an essential part of teacher training to develop their students' autonomy. In accordance with changing both of the students' and teachers' roles, Vasiljevic, 2013, urged both of teachers and students to be able to practice autonomy, and build a sense of ownership of the concept of autonomy and begin to see themselves as the agents of change. In a similar vein, Pinkman, 2005, investigated the effectiveness of using blogs in developing students' independency. The findings of the study suggested that students who adopted blogs in the teaching increased their motivation to use English and helped them improve their reading and writing skills. In addition, learners who participated in the blog project were interested in continuing to blog even after the semester finished. Finally, in this research, blog as independent tool is used to develop reading skill.

The Method

1. Design

The quasi-experimental design was used in this study, where a sample of fourth level students in English department was assigned to the experimental and control group. A pre/post test was conducted to measure the effectiveness of the program.

2. The participants

The participants of this research were twenty two undergraduate English major male students in Qassim Private Colleges, Saudi Arabia. Their ages ranged from 21 to 32 years and they were in the first-year of their studies. They spent one year in preparatory program before joining English major. The research was conducted in the second semester, 2014/2015. The students were enrolled in reading course (Reading 112). The students met in class three times a week (50 minutes per period). The students were then divided into two groups – the control group and the experimental group. Both groups were administered to the Pre-test which showed uniformity in the results with very little variation that shows the two groups are similar in their reading ability. Both the groups were instructed by two of the teachers for a full semester in reading course that was designed for them. The experimental group had some information about blogs and computer.

3. Instruments

A. The pre/post test

A pre/posttest was basically based on free reading passages that are out of the curriculum. It took place during the

second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. It was administered to the students of both the experimental and control groups to make sure that they were at the same level of performance before starting the experiment; and hence the progress achieved by the experimental group students could be attributed to using adopting blog as an independent learning tool. The pre-test was also used as a post-test to investigate the effectiveness of adopting blogs to develop reading skill.

The Content of the test
It consisted of two reading passages that were not seen for the students before. Every reading passage consisted was followed by ten multiple choices questions. The total mark of this test was (40) marks.

Piloting the test Piloting the test aimed at (a) determining reliability of the test; (b) determining the suitable time to be allotted for the test; and (c) obtaining item analysis results, including item difficulty and item discrimination. Therefore, 10 students were selected piloting the pre/post test. These students were randomly selected. Students of the pilot study belonged neither to the experimental group nor to the control group.

Test time
It was estimated that one classroom period (approximately 50 min) would provide sample time for the students to read the test questions and write their answers.

Test correction
The test was corrected automatically by auto correct machine.

The treatment Duration
Adopting blogs as an independent tool for developing reading skills continued for two months during the second term.

1. Aims of the treatment
Aims can be summarized in the following points:
1. Develop students' reading skills.
2. Develop students' autonomy.

Validity of the treatment
To measure the test content validity, the first version of the tests was given to 2 EFL assistant professors to evaluate appropriateness of the treatment in the light of their objectives. Nearly, they approved all of them.

Content of the program
The program consisted of eight reading comprehensions. They deal with different fields. It ranges from famous characters in history to legends. The students were asked to answer multiple choice questions about each reading passage. In addition, they can collaborate together to answer these question. They tried to correct each other mistakes. At the end of the week, they are asked to write a summary for the two passages in their own words.

RESULTS
Results of this study will be reported in terms of the study hypothesis.

1- Hypothesis one
There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental groups – using blog – and the control groups – receiving regular reading course – on the post-test in reading skill in favor of the experimental group. To test this hypothesis, t-test for independent samples was conducted to compare the means between the experimental and control groups.

Table 1. Post test results between control and experimental groups in reading skills

Group	N	M	S.D.	Std. Error Mean	t value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental	11	9.0909	2.21154	.66680	6.151	,000
Control	11	14.4545	1.86353	.56187		

Then the t. test was computed between the two groups. Observed t. value, (2.36) with the value of the tabulated t at the level (0.05) was .000. It showed that t value obtained from the posttest was more than t table value. This means that there were a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental groups – using blogs – and the control groups – receiving regular reading course – on the post-test in overall performance in reading in favor of the experimental group (Table 1).

Hence, the first hypothesis stated that there would be significant differences in posttest mean scores of both the control and the experimental group in overall performance in reading skills in favor of those of the experimental group, was verified.

Hypothesis Two
There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre-test and the post-test in reading skills in favor of the post test. To test the above hypothesis, the paired samples t-test was used, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Test results comparing the experimental group students' performance on the pre-test versus the post-test in reading skills

Group	N	M	S.D.	Std. Error Mean	t value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	11	7.7273	3.92660	1.18391	4.308	,002
Posttest	11	14.4545	1.86353	.56187		

Then the t. test was computed between the pretest and the posttest. Observed t. value, (4.308) with the value of the tabulated t at the level (0.05) was .002. It showed that t value obtained from the posttest was more than t table value. Hence, the second hypothesis stated that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental groups on the pre-test and the post-test in reading skills in favor of the post test was verified.

Hypothesis three

This hypothesis was not directly included in the treatment. It was a comparison between students' marks in reading course at the final exam. This exam was held by one of the assistant professor at (Qassim Private Colleges) QPC. Both of control group and experimental group marks were analyzed by using t-test for independent groups.

Table 3 t- test results comparing the experimental group and control group students' performance at the final exam in reading skills

Group	N	M	S.D.	Std. Error Mean	t value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	11	48.1818	16.65424	5.02144	5.905	,000
Posttest	11	83.4545	10.72720	3.23437		

Then the t. test was computed between the two groups at the final exam. Observed t. value, (5.905) with the value of the tabulated t at the level (0.05) was .000. It showed that t value obtained was more than t table value. Hence, the third hypothesis stated that there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental groups and the control groups in their final exam in reading at the end of the term in favor of the experimental group was verified (Table 3). To sum up, the three hypotheses of the study were supported by the results. The statistical analyses of data indicate that the experimental group students who used blog in reading skills course performed much better on the post-test in reading than the students who received regular reading course. Moreover, the experimental group students achieved significant progress in their final exam results after the treatment as compared to performance before the treatment. Hence, these positive findings proved the effectiveness of using blogs in developing university students' reading skills.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Reading, as one of the receptive skills, should be dealt in our curriculum in a different way. In addition, adopting technology in teaching English language creates a new atmosphere in our classrooms. Blogs, as one of the most important tools in web 2.0, could be an effective tool in developing students' autonomy. blogs could be used as a starting point in their understanding of the wider concept of autonomy. The learner feels he has his own freedom to learn independently. Moreover, students feel more motivated to learn a foreign language if they are given this freedom of choice. In the present study, the students got involved into online reading program through blogs. The students discussed the reading passage together. They could negotiate the meaning of the passage. Then, they could answer the reading passage questions. Finally, the students could summarize the main ideas of the passage. This is in line with Izquierdo and Reyes (2009) in assuring the effectiveness of discussion-based instruction to enhances learners' achievements in reading skills and that using blogs is an effective technique for leading classroom discussions as students increase their achievement level. Therefore, the experimental group shows a significant difference in its posttest and the final exam results. This research is in line with Ayden, 2014 in stating that blogging enhances literacy and critical thinking skills. In addition, blogs provide learning with an environment for autonomous learning and knowledge and information sharing.

Recommendations

In light of the finding of the present study, it offers several recommendations regarding the use blogs for language learning. First, teachers can use one type of blogs like teacher's blog to increase knowledge. Second, this research proved the effectiveness of blog in developing reading skills. In addition, it could be used to investigate listening and speaking skills. Third, blogs could be used as a student's e- portfolio. They could attach their videos, home assignments, and their writings.

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