Digital Portfolios
——Providing a New Learning Modality for EFL Students

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Abstract: For the past years, technological innovation in terms of increased computer processing speed, seemingly unlimited storage capacity, faster internet connection, simplicity of operations, and affordability, have all contributed to making the computer a ubiquitous part of our daily living. Such phenomenon did not only change the way students’ learn, but it also changed the students’ perception of text. Within such paradigm, the rise in popularity of the concept of digital portfolios, social networking, and cyber community have all contributed to the advancement of educational technology. In light of these issues, this quasi-experimental case study shall attempt to analyze the influence of maintaining a digital portfolio with regards to the students’ Business English language learning. Participants are a group of 30 students from the Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) department of a Science and Technology University in Taiwan. Data collected includes classroom observation logs, focus-group discussion logs, and students’ digital portfolios and reflection logs. Results show that students’ did not only improved their English Language proficiencies, but also increased their critical thinking skills. Findings of the study shall be able to provide additional insights in the use of digital tools in teaching EFL students Business English.

Keywords: Quasi-experimental study; blog writing; digital communities; English for Specific Purpose (ESP); educational technology

1 Introduction

The recent advancement of the world-wide-web and information technology (IT) has brought forth the evolution of educational technology. Similarly, technological change has also brought interconnectivity to all aspects of life and more importantly started the evolution of educational technology [1]. Embracing this change, educators have started to adapt these concepts in order to maximize students’ learning. During the last decade, the acade me has experienced electronic-learning (or e-learning) and mobile-learning (m-learning), which have currently evolved into the concept of ubiquitous learning (u-learning), have all contributed to the development of new platforms for computer-based assessment, interactive, and collaborative learning pedagogy.

Beyond this spectrum, an increased in development of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses was also observed recently in Taiwan. Currently, English is being regarded as the de-facto language in the areas of banking, commerce, and trade. Hence, much emphasis is placed on ESP courses such as Business English. For today’s student, having a good Business English skills and leadership capacity before graduation is seen as vital component in their future careers. More so, with the prevalent of computer mediated communication in the society, the use of the English language will become so common and shall take the lead in making more effective social connections. Therefore, the help of a creative, cooperative, and technologically assisted non-threatening activity to master Business English skills are some important methodology that should be explore.

2 Literature Review

The development and examination of the distinct features of language development in tertiary school students is essential for addressing the current changes in higher education trends. Therefore, in order to fully grasp and understand the different constructs behind multiliteracies, digital portfolios, and Business English, the following literature review were conducted.

2.1 Multiliteracies in the Current Digital Age

Many mentioned that the shift of the traditional literacies to the current notion of multiliteracies is caused by the rapid evolution and integration of IT in an age of increased cultural diversity and global connectedness [2]. In general, the concept of multiliteracies originated with the New London Group [3], which refers to two issues regarding the evolution of language today. The first is the variability of meaning making in the different cultural, social or domain-specific contexts whereas the second is the impact of information technologies on the ways people use and interacts with texts. Overall, these issues inevitably affect how people communicate and more importantly influence how education is achieved [4].

In the EFL setting, traditional definitions of literacy have focused on reading and writing, however, the defi-
nition of literacy today is more complex. The process of becoming literate today is not limited to learning how to use language effectively, but is the summation of the multimodal linguistic and cognitive functioning of the individual in society [3]. Some stated that a multi-literate person is someone who is flexible and strategic, and can understand and use literacy and literate practices with a range of texts and technologies [6]. Ultimately, multi-literate individuals possess a range of skills that enable them to participate fully in all aspects of modern society, from workforce to family and to academic community.

Within the classroom, integration of IT into teaching pedagogy has been an ongoing process [7]. A multiliteracies pedagogical classroom facilitates a constructivist model of learning in which students can make meaning through authentic experiences [9]. In a computer-mediated learning environment, students develop traditional skills and make the purposes and processes more authentic than they were in the past [9]. More importantly, the multiliteracies approach helps students learn through using top of the line IT equipment, which students are familiar with and easily become motivated, and helps provide the avenue for collaborative learning.

Although most studies have shown that Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) indeed show promising results [9], however still some researchers have also mentioned that a CAL environment is not entirely successful [9]. In a study regarding the factors that facilitate teacher skill, teacher morale, and perceived student learning in technology-using classrooms, Baylor and Ritchie [11] mentioned that technology integration was predicted by teacher openness to change and the percentage of technology use with others.

In a study regarding multimedia digital storytelling, Hull and Nelson [12] mentioned that teaching in the age of digitally afforded multimodality, students show positive reactions with regards to the use of different educational technology. Similarly, in a study regarding the students’ use of digital technologies in their literacy practices, after an 18-month period, results show that there is indeed a centrality of multimedia popular culture texts within the students [9]. Within the context of EFL, Kasper used the combination of collaborative learning communities’ approaches and IT to enhance the students’ linguistic, academic, socio-affective, and meta-cognitive skills [13]. Results also show that students tend to have increased literacy skills after being exposed to multiliteracies pedagogy. In general, most studies in multiliteracies are recent and results are encouraging, however, almost all of the studies detailed a carefully thought-out curriculum design integrating with IT. Hence, the need for undergoing students’ needs analysis is deemed critical in the curriculum design process of any successful multiliteracies pedagogy.

2.2 Digital Portfolios and other Learning Technology

Digital portfolios are actually a collection of digital works or evidence that pertains to an individual performance. The good thing with digital portfolios is that an individual can tailor or assemble the information in any way they see fit. Therefore, digital portfolios can be used in a variety of purposes. Furthermore, digital portfolios can contain a combination of text, graphics, and even videos. In essence, students will be able to produce creative presentations to suit their every need.

Many studies have been done regarding the combination of IT and learning pedagogy. Researchers mentioned that the knowledge-building processes occurring in blog creation do indeed possess much potential in enhancing the learners’ competence [14]. Online discussions (including the exchange of personal information) and maintaining blog postings (such as peer review of essays and reflection logs) are both beneficial to the learners’ knowledge gain [15, 16].

2.3 Importance of Business English

ESP has been around since the 1960s, ESP originated from the massive expansion of scientific, technical, and economic activities on a global scale, which resulted in the increased demands on English communication [17]. In Taiwan, English was once a required course for college students, which emphasized the reading of literature. However, in 1993 the Taiwanese Ministry of Education abolished the mandatory English reading requirements in higher education institutions, due to the growing concerns that both the English language teaching and curricula had been ignoring the students’ needs [18]. This phenomenon opened up the opportunities for universities to freely design their own English language learning courses based on a content focus or a designated-skill focus.

Recently, the trend of globalization and internationalization have brought forth numerous opportunities for the need of English competent individuals [19]. These actually brought forth the need for universities to become internationally competitive, which created dramatic changes in the goal of teaching English [20]. More so with the current need for supplying the future workforce of the business industry. Therefore, ESP in Taiwan; more specifically learning Business English has become a strong necessity for the future graduates’ career.

3 Methodology

This research is designed as a case study, wherein the primary objective is to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used [21]. For the current study, the specific case chosen is
to understand the benefits in adapting the use of digital portfolio in a Business English course program. Study participants are a group of 30 junior students from the Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) department of a Science and Technology University in Taiwan.

This study is also designed as a quasi-experimental. The pre-test/post-test single group design will be used to determine the effectiveness of adapting the concept of digital portfolios in teaching a Business English course program. This quasi-experimental design is referred as a compromise design, because the random selection or assignment of students and classrooms is impracticable

3.1 Research Process

This study was accomplished around four (4) months, covering the entire 1st (fall) semester of the 2011-2012 School Year. Student participants are all enrolled in a Business English course program, more specifically, a course on Business English Writing. At the beginning of the course program, students were given a 100 item multiple choice pre-test regarding frequently used Business English terminologies. A similar post-test (with items arranged differently with the pre-test) shall be administered at the end of the semester.

Students meet with their teacher once a week for a total of 18 weeks. During each of the meetings, the teacher gave lessons regarding Business English writing such as: autobiography writing, various types of business letters, and job application letters. Within the course program, students are required to use the digital portfolio (www.blogonus.org); a website running the Mahara platform, to submit their work. Students are free to design and setup their own pages. Focus-group discussions are held every 3 weeks, except the last week, wherein the students submit a reflection log summarizing their overall experience in using the digital portfolio.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data collected for the current study are the qualitative researchers’ observation and meeting logs, students’ reflection write-ups, students’ digital portfolios, focus-group discussions notes, and the quantitative 100 items pre/post test on frequently used Business English terms. Qualitative data were collected and transcribed using the Miles and Huberman method for generating meaning from transcribed data. In addition, the students’ write-ups and digital portfolios are analyzed using the Text Analytics (Genre Analysis) method. Resulting themes were then organized and group together forming the various implications on the usage of digital portfolios. While, the independent sample T-Test were applied on the pre/post test results to determine the effectiveness of the digital portfolios.

4 Results and Discussions

In order to understand the benefits in adapting the use of digital portfolio in a Business English course program, results can be separated into three sections: the result of the Pre/Post test, the perceived gains of the student participants, and the results of the text analytics.

4.1 Result of Pre/Post Test

In order to determine the effectiveness of the digital portfolio in enhancing the students’ Business English competence, a 100 item pre-test and post-test was administered at the beginning and end of the course program. The independent sample T-test was conducted to compare the Pre and Post-test scores. Results show that there exists a significant difference between the pre-test (Mean = 58.53, SD = 10.83) and post-test (M = 85.87, SD = 12.48) scores with t (60) = 9.06, p < 0.000. The magnitude of the differences in the means is 0.59, which is of moderate effect. Such results clearly state that students have increased their Business English competencies.

4.2 Perceived Student Gains

In order to understand the various student gains, focus-group discussions and students’ reflection logs were analyzed. Table 1, shows the results separated into 4 (four) themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Perceived Student Gains</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. English language improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learns new Business English vocabularies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved writing skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have clearer concept of grammar</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Cooperative learning processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learns that cooperative learning is essential</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learns to correct other people’s work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide positive feedbacks</td>
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<td>3. Effective use of technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain additional knowledge in educational technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learns the possibility of new technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creativity in designing web pages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video editing skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Gain additional knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learns practical skills in job applications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learns to express ideas using not only text but also videos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Realize how to choose the right career</td>
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Generated themes are as follows: English language improvement, cooperative learning processes, effective use of technology, and gain additional knowledge.

Table 1, shows the four different themes with their various perceived gains. Students mentioned that besides having the originally predicted Business English lan-
guage gains, students also improved on both English their grammar and writings skills. Furthermore, since students are helping each other not only in the creation of the digital portfolios, but also with the correction of their write-ups. Students have gained additional knowledge in terms of cooperative learning process.

Similarly, students have mentioned that by using the digital portfolios, many have gained technological knowledge that is quite useful. Lastly, students mentioned that they learn a lot of practical skills that are able to help their future career.

4.3 Result of Text Analytics

For the current study, text analytics was only accomplished on the student participants’ autobiography. Result of the text analytics have shown that the students’ writing style is rather argumentative than descriptive or narrative. Argumentative in a sense that students use words such as although, but, and not only. Argumentative statement literally refers to everything that involves debate and possible disagreement, and to opinion as opposed to the uncontested facts of exposition. It also means agreeing or disagreeing with a given proposition, either strongly or tentatively.

5 Conclusions

This case study is primarily aimed at understanding the benefits in adapting the use of digital portfolio in a Business English course program. Besides the significant increased of post-test scores, students perceived that they have gained additional knowledge in four areas, such as: English language improvement, cooperative learning processes, effective use of technology, and gain additional knowledge. Furthermore, with regards to the students’ autobiography writing; students mostly used argumentative statements, rather than descriptive and/or narrative ones. Such results have given educators and students alike, the much needed information that would be able to aid their writing skills. In sum, digital portfolios do indeed provide numerous potentials for the improvement of the teaching learning process. More opportunities and strategies should be encouraged to further the empirical evidence of the new learning pedagogy.

References