

PADLET: A DIGITAL COLLABORATIVE TOOL FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have highlighted the benefits of interactive teaching tools and methods in improving students' learning attainment. The shift in technology development demands a change in the traditional pedagogy that used to be the epitome of teaching and learning. Hence, interactive teaching methods are regarded as the much-needed boost for 21st century learning environments in which learners are given more autonomy in their learning process. Thus, online platforms such as digital walls, applications (apps), and Open Education Resources are providing students with unprecedented collaborative learning possibilities. In this study, a collaborative learning tool, Padlet, was used in an instructional model of the English Language course for 50 undergraduate students in a public university. Data collected were through questionnaires that requested students' feedback on their attitudes and perspectives pertaining to the use of Padlet and how it motivated them and helped them increase their interest in writing in English. The findings show that while the acceptance of the use of Padlet as a learning tool among Malaysian students were encouraging, there are some challenges to be considered when using Padlet as a learning tool.

Keywords: Padlet, Academic writing, ESL/ELT, Collaborative learning

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Writing is a channel that helps people to convey their ideas and opinions. Writing skill is a productive skill and it is considered as an important constituent of second language learning. Therefore, it is essential to focus on improving this significant skill. It has become so common to use a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) environment to write because most people, presently, like to communicate through computers, which penetrate into their daily life, particularly the life of young people (Fageeh, 2011). In a traditional classroom, the writing process is teacher-centered more than student centered because students write about a particular topic receiving guidance from their teacher, and then the teacher revises their works. So, they receive feedback only from their teacher (Yang, Ko & Chung, 2005).

On the other hand, a computer-based writing environment provides learners with a chance to communicate and interact with each other and with their instructor at the same time. Several studies have proved that using computers in the writing class enhance this skill and decrease the mistakes of learners (Grejda & Hannafin, 1992). This study investigates the students' attitudes toward the use of Padlet in learning writing.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Technology has become an important aspect of our life, particularly in the educational field. However, ESL learners in UiTM Tapah are not efficient in the writing class because they do not get great benefits from the traditional method since they think that they should study just to pass their exam at the end of the semester. Consequently, the researcher suggests that it can be helpful to activate their interest in technology in enhancing their writing. In this study, Padlet has been chosen, in particular, because there is no any published study conducted on this online notice board and it may be the first study on Padlet in UiTM Tapah. Therefore, this research highlights the students' perception of the use of Padlet in improving learners' writing performance through individual and collaborative activities.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the student's perception on how padlet help students in learning English, and their attitudes toward using it in the ESL classrooms.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The outcomes of this study can be significant to ESL learners as it represents an effort to participate in improving teaching writing in English language classrooms by offering a teaching strategy based on using Padlet in writing classrooms. This study also provides the overall benefits of peer interaction and collaborative writing via using Padlet. Meanwhile, this study can lead to the verification and testing of new methodologies in writing instruction. It can also be significant to ESL teachers and curriculum developers as it introduces them an easy way to incorporate the microcomputer represented in the use of Padlet in writing classrooms as it encourages writing abilities and group work among ESL learners. It can also be helpful to the researchers who are interested in incorporating technology in education as it provides them with current literature on another pedagogical online forum. Thus, it helps its users to have new experiences that can aptly be transferred into their daily life. Finally, the researcher hopes that this study will have far-reaching conclusions which can be useful and practical for English instructors.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is considered as a base for this study which determines the language learning theories that this study shall draw on. Collaborative Learning Theory and Interactionist Approach are the theories that have something in common with Padlet in the learning field. These theories provide learners with an appropriate learning environment that should be provided with the important elements of successful learning and teaching processes such as interaction, motivation, cooperation and enthusiasm.

2.1.1 Collaborative Learning Theory

The theory that underlies the use of Padlet in the writing classroom is Collaborative Learning Theory. This theory emphasizes the group interaction. The essential element, which contributes to the successful collaboration, is shared among people (Fageeh, 2011). According to this theory, the role of the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than a leader of the class. The learners should work collaboratively to achieve the goal of the learning process. Padlet gives the learners several chances to collaborate in which they become capable of sharing their thoughts and feelings. Therefore, Padlet offers the learners not only a joyful environment, but also an effective environment in which they are able to exchange and share educative information.

2.1.2 Interactionist Approach

The champions of this approach believe that learners can learn through interaction with others. They believe that the learning process can be easier when they get input, which should be comprehensible, and then figure the meaning out through negotiation in order to produce output and give feedback. Learners become able to build their knowledge and their linguistic ability through interaction with others until they achieve the wanted level of comprehension (Yang, 2007). When applying this approach to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), it is obvious that it can be applied through using Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in which people nowadays like to communicate through synchronous or asynchronous text-based CMC environments either inside or outside the schools. Many researchers have proved that applying the Interactionist Approach to CMC has achieved positive results when negotiating with each other because it facilitates communicating among the participants and improves their writing proficiency (Chun, in Magnan, 2008).

Regarding Padlet, it provides opportunities to learners and their instructor to communicate whenever they want. When they interact with each other to do different tasks or to discuss a particular topic, unlike face-to-face interaction, they have time to think, to correct their mistakes and to equally comment; that is, this can enhance their writing proficiency and composition ability. Having looked at the previous theories, it can be concluded that using CMC, particularly Padlet that this study concerns with, to improve the writing performance is based on many language learning theories. Many key features, which Padlet offers to the learners, can help them to improve their writing skills. Collaboration, providing and receiving feedback, equal opportunities for participation, enough time to think and correct their mistakes, inserting photos, video clips, and other documents and exchanging information are essential characteristics that Padlet provides learners with.

2.2.3 Effectiveness of Using Social Networking Sites (SNSs) on ESL Writing Performance

2.2.3.1 Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networks as web-based tools that enable people to build a public or quasi-public profile within a particular system. Additionally, these tools make users capable of editing a list consisting of people who those users want to share their information with. Therefore, people join these social networks to interact, communicate and share people their thoughts, opinions and interests and try to find other individuals or groups who have the same attitudes and ideas.

According to Warnock (2009), it is important to teach writing online because the environment can entirely be textual. This environment can be guided for students to know how they become able to express themselves using their own words in which this technological communications service offers opportunities for students to collaborate and interact with their teachers or with the other audience. Moreover, this online environment gives writing teachers a unique chance in which this kind of writing-centered online courses enable teachers and students to interact beyond the school walls and help them to create a friendly educational community through using technological tools, but actually this is not for all students because some of them prefer those discussions which occur inside the classroom (i.e. face-to-face interaction). Therefore, using these tools can be helpful for shy students as those students become motivated to socially and professionally connect with others in which this reflects the real value of education.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

This study was implemented in Faculty of Accountancy at University Technology MARA (UiTM), Tapah. The class was an English writing course (ELC 230) and was made up of 30 learners. In a computer lab, learners were shown a sample padlet created by the instructor. Learners were then instructed on how to use padlet on Padlet.com, free online tool that is best described as an online notice board. Learners were then instructed to write their first padlet entry, a self-introduction and read two to three of their classmates' padlet and comment on them. After the initial lab session, the project was conducted as an out-of-class project. Learners were responsible for writing one entry of 150 words per week, and commenting on two or three of their classmates' padlet. The contents of their entries were to be based on classroom context. For example, if learners studied how to express their opinions about Cyberbully that week in class, they were encouraged to share or apply that knowledge on the padlet. After the semester was completed, the questionnaire was completed, and open-ended questions were asked of the students to gauge their attitudes on the project.

3.1 Setting up Padlet, an online notice board

The researcher used a free online notice board (padlet.com) to explain how to participate as a padlet community. The process of creating a padlet is a fairly simple, three step process as explained by the Padlet.com website: 1) create an account; 2) name the padlet; and 3) choose a template. Once the padlet is created, the students can add as many postings as they like. All postings are listed free form as the students double tap it in the padlet. Readers can freely view the contents of the padlet and post comments. The whole class can view the comments left for their classmates postings and the communication continues. This way, an asynchronous interaction can take place (see Figure 1).

3.2 Padlet and Academic Writing

The English Writing Course (ELC230) is a compulsory course to be taken by part three Diploma students in UiTM Tapah. The course runs for four hours per week over a period of 14 weeks in a semester. Its main objective is to equip the students with the writing skills which will enable them to cope with the academic demands while at the university. During the first week of the term, the instructor's padlet was opened at Padlet.com. The instructor's padlet posts included a general welcome message, instructions on how to write comments to the entries and a slideshow about the content of the writing course. The instructor frequently mentioned topics in the padlet posts and motivated students who had read the posts or done the activities to share their experiences with the class. The notes posted by the instructor and students can contain links, videos, images and document files.

Based on these uses, four specific goals for the use of the class padlet were created:

1. To write using a variety of genres, both personal and academic
2. To discuss and negotiate a variety of issues related to academic writing
3. To provide a space outside the classroom for students to collaborate and argue
4. To create texts that could both express students' own viewpoints and be used by other students to comment or support their views

By framing the use of padlet in this way, it is hoped to capture different types of writing, which could be used to achieve the goals of the course. Although the course was structured around the rhetorical functions of definition, description, discussion and argumentative, some of the topics in the posts were intended to make students become aware of their learning strategies in general, their ESL writing strategies in particular, how they used dictionaries and how to go about learning vocabulary. Students were asked to view two other students' postings and then post a comment. In this way, each student added their postings and comments on other students' postings. The questionnaire was given to students in the final week of the class.

3.3 Participants

The participants in this research were 30 Diploma in Accountancy students at University Technology MARA (UiTM), Tapah. Total number of respondents was 11 males and 19 females aged 19 to 21. The period of study on application of padlet in the writing course lasted one term, Dec 2015 - April 2016. The employed methods of gathering data consisted of administering designed questionnaires, analyzing students' responses, carrying out padlet activities, providing feedback to learners, evaluating learners' performance in various online activities, and analyzing the utility of padlet activities.

3.4 Instrument of the Study

A survey questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study and it was pilot-tested on a group of students to check its validity and reliability. An improvement on the piloted questionnaire items were then made based on the students' feedback. The final version of the questionnaire had two major parts. The first part consists of eight items. It included basic information about the participants, such as experiences in using the Internet. In the second part, twenty-four questions were designed to elicit participants' attitudes toward the use of padlet in learning writing. The questions in the questionnaire were quantified by a Likert-scale of 1 to 2 (1 = Disagree, 2 = agree). The reliability of the second part was determined using Cronbach's alpha (.90). The questionnaire reached a high reliability. The questionnaire was administered during class in the last week of the semester (the students would have already completed the writing course) to get their feedback on the effectiveness of the project in developing their English writing skills, the advantages and disadvantages they might have faced when doing the project, as well as their suggestions to improve the project. With their consent, a random number of students were invited to take part in a questionnaire so that the instructor could get more in-depth information on their use of padlet. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency analysis and percentages and the results were then tabulated.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

The data were computer-analyzed using an SPSS, 10.0 Program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for Windows and Microsoft Excel, version 2000. A reliability test was used to verify the reliability of the questionnaire. Students responded to the questionnaire. Closed and open-ended questions solicited students' perceptions of using the padlet as a learning tool. A 2-point Likert-type scale was employed with 1 to 2 representing, "Disagree", and "Agree". Key results and findings will be addressed according to the several sections of the questionnaire. First section includes demographic and previous padlet experience and the second section deals with students' attitudes towards the use of padlet in writing.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

30 Diploma in Accountancy students (100%) at University Technology MARA (UiTM), Tapah responded to the questionnaire. Closed and open-ended questions were used. A 2-point Likert-type scale was employed with 1 to 2 representing, "Disagree", and "Agree", Key results and findings will be addressed according to the several sections of the questionnaire. First section includes demographic and previous padlet experience. Second section's focus was on students' general perceptions in using padlet as a reflective and communication tool. Table 1 summarizes the results and quantitative data via open-ended questions were also collected after each section. Additional open-ended questions were also asked to gain more insights from the students. The

questions and responses to the questionnaire are shown in Table 1. The first part of the questionnaire includes basic information about the participants.

4.1 Padlet experience in classroom

Regarding the survey for the writing course, after thirty students completed it, the results showed that before the course, most students (87%) had had experience with the Internet: 83% had experience with emails, 77% with chats, 73% with social networks, but only 7% had experience with padlet. When asked to comment on how they had heard about padlet or had their own padlet before this course, Quiet a number (66.7%) of respondents had not heard about what a padlet was before I asked them to respond to one; 4 (13.3%) had heard about it, but had no idea what it was; 3 (10%) had heard about it and also had a rough idea what it was. Only 3 (10%) respondents had their own padlet. This indicates that padlet are not well-known around the young generation in UiTM Tapah. Concerning the time spent online, 40% of our students reported they spent more than 20 hours per week, 27% between 11-15 hours, and 20% 6-10. A percentage of 13% reported they spent only 1-5 hours online weekly. These results may be due to the kind of access they have to the Internet. Notice that 67% of our students have Internet access from home while another 33% get logged in at the university, library, friends or relatives. The main aim of this study was to report on the attitudes of the students (N=30) towards the padlet which was constructed in their learning environment at University Technology MARA (UiTM), Tapah. The discussion will highlight the most significant findings in the second part of the questionnaire.

4.2 Students' Responses toward the Use of Padlet in Learning Writing

Analyses of quantitative data indicated that the majority of the students (see Table 1) showed a positive attitude towards using padlet in their learning activities. 29 out of 30 of the students were glad that they had their own padlet activity. As for item (2), 90% (27) of students said that it was easy to create and publish their padlet, while only 10% said it was hard for them to create a padlet, but almost all managed to complete their task and found that they (86.7%) have no difficulty using their padlet (item # 3), and they (83.3%) feel comfortable using their padlet (item # 4). Most of the students also mentioned that it is convenient as they can access the padlet at their own pace. They appreciated the fact that they can do it anytime, anywhere. Writing on padlet (90%; 27) was interesting and enjoyable (item # 5). A high percentage of students (80%) also think that the learner padlet is not a waste of time (item # 6). The majority of students think it is simple to use padlet and feel comfortable using the online notice board. When asked if it is fast and convenient to update information on the padlet (item # 7), 26 out of 30 students responded positively (see Table 1).

Moreover, they state that the students in their surveys express their joy and happiness by easily updating posts to padlet. More than three quarters of the students (70%) "I like posting many articles and photos or clips of films on the padlet (item # 8)". In general, students expressed general approval of the padlet medium, citing the added convenience and the uniqueness of the medium, although students also mentioned technical concerns, such as experiencing anxiety about whether the assignment had been received., The students' reactions to comments on their padlet from their instructor and peers: The students' reaction to comments on their padlet from their peers was one of the most important findings that have been reached in this study.

As shown in Table 1, on item # 9, "I like to invite my friends or classmates to read my posting", 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) expressed positively. When asked if "reading the comments and entries of my peers on the padlet helped me to learn and improve my own writing (item 10#)", 77.7% of students expressed their positive agreement. With respect to item 11# "I like making comments on my classmates' posts", a large number of the students (66.7%) were positive, whereas 33.3% felt uncomfortable criticizing others' work. On item 12#, many students (80%) think that responding to the comments received on their postings improves their writing. On item 13#, "I found it difficult to comment on the padlet of my peers", 70% of students expressed their disagreement with this view.

In summary, students enjoyed commenting, but were not convinced of the pedagogical benefits, and appeared to desire more guidance in regards to structuring their remarks to be helpful as opposed to "preachy" or overly negative. When asked about how they felt about other learners commenting on their postings (item 14#), 86.7% of learners responded positively, saying that they "enjoyed" or "liked" reading comments from their classmates. Using peer review is beneficial for students to form critical thinking skills which are used to revise their writing. By doing so, students can learn other's viewpoints on it, knowing what comments they will get after they finish an essay. The online peer review, compared with oral comments in person, has the following advantages: time and place independent, no pressure to quickly respond, and the competence to control conversations.

4.3 Students' Responses toward Padlet activities and Learning Grammar and Vocabulary

As illustrated by the data in Table 1, padlet activities appeared to have provided the students with the opportunity to learn grammar (item#15) and develop vocabulary independently (item#16). A considerable number of them (80%) strongly agreed that they had learnt and improved their L2 grammar while 90% of them perceived that they had acquired new vocabulary when reading their friends' postings (item#17).

4.4 Useful Tool for Writing

All the students felt that using padlet in the class as a writing tool was a good idea (item#18). The students benefited a lot from this activity. They indicated that when using padlet they were able to write better because they (63.3%) were more aware of the need to check their writing before posting (item#19), and when writing on papers, some of them (26.7%) did not carefully check their grammar (item#20). Most probably, they realized that when writing online, the Web site is open for everyone to read, and they tried their best to write using correct grammar and sentence structure. On item#21, "When I write on the padlet, I don't worry about mistakes", most students (86.7%) expressed agreement. High percentage of students checks the dictionary while they were writing their padlet response (item #22). The majority of students still engaged in typical tasks associated with writing,

such as drafting and checking the dictionary. This indicates that the students valued the task and wanted to post something that reflected their skill in writing.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The use of the internet as a resource in language education is rapidly expanding, and opening up exciting avenues for developing second language skills. One of these avenues is padlet, an innovation of the Internet which is authentic, and it provides students with a real-world activity. The data obtained from the study also proves that the students formed positive attitudes toward using padlet in English writing classes. The findings of the present study also prove that padlet can be popular in the language classrooms, especially for UiTM Tapah students who learn English as a second language. As demonstrated by the attitudinal survey data, the majority of students stated that they enjoyed posting, reading their classmates' posts and making comments on those posts, they almost unanimously stated that they liked having their classmates and the instructor write comments on their posts. Students feel more comfortable with padlet as they post messages. A large majority also found the activity using padlet is useful, motivating and effective for improving their writing. It is hoped that in order to improve the efficiency of English teaching by using padlet, students will be more willing to write, and share their padlet experience with their classmates and people all over the globe.

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Table 1

No.	Statements	Agree		Disagree	
1.	I am glad that I have my own English padlet.	29	96.7	1	3.3
2.	I feel it is quite easy to create and publish my own padlet.	27	90.0	3	10.0
3.	I think I have no difficulty in using my padlet.	26	86.7	4	13.3
4.	I feel comfortable using the padlet.	25	83.3	5	16.7
5.	Writing on padlet was enjoyable and interesting.	27	90.0	3	10.0
6.	I think the learner padlet is a waste of time.	24	80.0	6	20.0
7.	It is fast and convenient to update information on the padlet.	21	70.0	9	30.0
8.	I like posting many articles and photos or clips of films on the padlet.	20	66.7	10	33.3
9.	I like to invite my classmates to read my postings.	22	73.3	8	26.7
10.	Reading the comments and entries of my peers on the padlet helped me to learn and improve my own writing.	23	77.7	7	23.3
11.	I like making comments on my classmates' posts.	20	66.7	10	33.3
12.	Responding to the comments received on my postings improves my writing.	24	80.0	6	20.0
13.	I found it difficult to comment on the postings of my peers.	21	70.0	9	30.0
14.	I like having classmates make comments on my posts.	26	86.7	4	13.3
15.	I am more careful with my writing when involved with the padlet activities.	24	80.0	6	20.0
16.	In general, I feel that my English grammar has somewhat improved since I involved with the padlet activities.	18	60.0	12	40.0
17.	I learn more new words when reading my friends' postings.	27	90.0	3	10
18.	I think it is a good idea to use padlet to practice writing skills in English.	30	100	0	0
19.	I don't like to check my writing when I write on paper.	19	63.3	11	36.7
20.	I always check my sentences before I post my writing on the padlet.	22	73.3	8	26.7
21.	When I write on the padlet, I don't worry about mistakes.	26	86.7	4	13.3
22.	I am more active in checking up meaning of difficult words in the dictionary when involved with the padlet activities.	18	60.0	12	40.0

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