A SURVEY STUDY OF PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TOOLS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING OF THAI EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper aimed to explore Personal Learning Environment tools for English language learning of Thai EFL undergraduate students. The study used the questionnaire as an instrument to gather the information from the first year public university students studying in foundation English course. These were administered to 150 learners. The data received from the questionnaires were analyzed using the descriptive analysis in percentage. The results indicated that Google and YouTube were mainly used to learn and improve all skills of English, while Facebook was used to focus on learning and improving reading and writing skills. These tools conformed to the key characteristics of Personal Learning Environment (PLE) which were learner control, lifelong learning and various tools. Most students used Google to learn and improve every skill of English since it has been considered as a valuable resource for support independent language learning. It contributed learners to search for the information they desired through the use of keywords. Like Google, YouTube was used to learn and improve all skills of English because it provided a rich resource for learners to

explore together with discover educational content. Besides, it offered fast and fun access to language, culture-based videos as well as instruction from all over the globe. For Facebook, it assisted learners to learn and improve their reading and writing skills as well as their collaborative learning. They could share, collaborate or work as a team and critique on each other's work with easy access.

Keywords

Personal Learning Environment, Personal Learning Environment Tools, English Language Learning

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1. Introduction

To develop students' English proficiency in the age of globalization, technology seems to be the effective tools to support. It has an impact on the world of education in term of both language learning and instruction. It is believed that the integration of technology can increase students' academic performance, motivation and language learning skills (Cheng, 2003; Egbert, 2002; Blake, 2000; Skinner & Austin, 1999 cited in Alzu'bi & Sabha, 2013). Moreover, second language acquisition (SLA) can be studied when learners are exposed to new language and have interactions 'between the person and the computer', and 'between the learner and other people' (Chapelle, 2003).

With the availability of computer and educational technologies in today's world, the use of computer assisted language learning (CALL) in English language learning has been encouraged since CALL can help enhance the quality of input, authenticity of communication, and provide more useful feedback (Khamkhien, 2012). Furthermore, CALL can promote learner-centered which means students are more actively involved in their learning process as self-directed learners with more freedom, choice, control and responsibility for their learning. This concept of learning which allows learners to manage their own learning in their own environment with the help of using technologies as tools is called Personal Learning Environment (PLE) according to Attwell (2007), Schaffert & Hilzensauer, (2008); Tomberg, et al., (2013). In PLE, learners can use a variety of online tools such as CMC tools comprising asynchronous tools and synchronous tools, and Web 2.0 to help develop their English learning. Therefore, in order to understand Thai students better in terms of the personal learning environment tools they use to improve their own English language learning, this study aims to conduct a survey to investigate PLE tools for developing

four skills of English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Personal Learning Environment ple

PLE is a new term which various scholars interpret and define in different ways as follows. Attwell (2007) stated that PLE is not an application but a new approach to use new technology for learning. The idea of PLE is to allow learners to organize their own learning which can take place in different contexts and situations by using tools to support their learning. PLE also gives freedom, and allows learners to choose content, to communicate, and to collaborate with others easily. He explained that the development of PLE represents a significant shift to support learning processes.

Willson et al. (2006) illustrated that PLE is a new pattern which users can utilize a wide range of technologies rather than a category of software for learning. In his perspective, the characteristics of PLE design may be successful by combining the use of devices (e.g. laptops, mobile phones, and portable media devices), applications (e.g. newsreaders, instant messaging clients, browsers, and calendar), and services (e.g. weblogs, wikis & social bookmark services).

Chatti (2011) explained that PLE is to support not only a personal space controlled by the learner, but also a social landscape offering the way to connect with others in order to exchange knowledge and pursue educational goals. PLE represents a shift away from the traditional model of learning to a model which learners can use online and offline resources they select and organize on their own. As can be seen, various authors provide diverse definitions for PLE. Therefore, the concept of the PLE cannot be singularly determined in one definition. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that key characteristics of PLE are:

- Learner control (Attwell, 2007; Van Harmelen, 2008; Jones, 2009)
- Lifelong learning (Waters, 2008; Attwell, 2008, Renon, 2012)
- Various tools (Downes, 2006; Attwell, 2007; Mikroyannidis & Connolly, 2012)

The term 'Personal Learning Environment' (PLE) has developed due to two main reasons (Hölterhof & Heinen, 2014). Firstly, it is because the current institutional learning environment referred to Learning Management System (LMS) does not facilitate the level of personalization and individualization of learning required (Hölterhof & Heinen, 2014; Mikroyannidis & Connolly, 2012). Secondly, with the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, it has changed the way people interact and share information on the Internet (Casquero, et al., 2010). Learners can now create and be responsible for their own learning (Atwell, 2007).

2.2 Personal Learning Environment Tools

To support PLE for English language learning, computer mediated communication (CMC) tools and Web 2.0 play vital roles.

CMC tools are utilized to support educational activities. They help to improve critical thinking, problem solving, communication skill, argumentation skill, and collaboration among learners (Kim, 2008). CMC tools comprise synchronous and asynchronous tools. According to Johnson (2006), synchronous tools involves real time communication and collaboration. These tools such as audio conferencing, web conferencing, videoconferencing, chat, and instant messaging allow people to connect in the same time but in different places, whereas asynchronous tools are used to facilitate learners for communication and collaboration in a different time and different place (Ashley, 2003). The asynchronous tools, e.g. e-mail, discussion board, web blogs, streaming audio, streaming video, and website links, take the advantage of being able to have more time to digest the information and put it in the proper context.

Another important tool is Web 2.0. According to O'Reilly (2005), Web 2.0 or the read and write web is the second generation of Web 1.0 characterized by the fact that users not only access information but also actively share and create contents as well as knowledge within global online communities. Tu, Blocher, and Ntoruru (2008) asserted that Web 2.0 aims to enhance creativity, information sharing and collaboration among users who can now be both consumers and producers.

Several studies found that a variety of tools can help learners to progress in their English competency. Some tools are very effective and used to develop many skills of English at the same time, for example, search engine such as Google (Chinnery 2008; Guo & Zhang, 2007; Hafner & Candlin, 2007; Milton, 2006; Shei, 2008a, 2008b; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004 cited in Conroy, 2010), YouTube and Skype (Chhabra, 2012).

To focus on improving a specific skill of English, here are the tools provided for students to use in enhancing their English language competence.

- **Listening**

According to Walker & White (2013), to improve listening skills means to help learners develop perception, identifying words, interpreting meaning and understanding information. The tools that help to enrich listening skill are podcast such as iTunes (Dang, et al., 2012; Poore, 2013), YouTube (Walker & White, 2013), TED Talks, online listening labs

(e.g. Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab) and radio or TV stations (e.g. BBC Learning English, VOA Learning English and Breaking News English) (Dang, et a2l., 012).

- **Speaking**

    Walker & White (2013) stated that to improve speaking skill is to help learners develop pronunciation and performing speech acts. The tools that help to enhance speaking skill are Skype (Gardner, 1985 cited in Ryobe, 2009), Voki (Walker & White, 2013), TED Talks (Dang, et al., 2012), Tell Me More (Hubbard, 2009), VoiceThread (Kim, 2014; Stannard & Basiel, 2013) and Voxopop (Stannard & Basiel, 2013).

- **Reading**

    According to Walker & White (2013), to improve reading skill means to help learners develop vocabulary knowledge, the speed of reading and evaluating the information given in the text. The tools that help to increase reading skill are Flickr, Slide Share, Delicious (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011), Breaking News English (Stannard & Basiel, 2013), blog (e.g. Blogger and WordPress), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia) and Facebook (Walker & White, 2013). Furthermore, online dictionaries are important for college-level English language learners to make progress in reading and writing skill (Rios, 2013). The mostly used online dictionaries are Longdo, Cambridge, Oxford, Lexitron and Marriam-Webster (Munpru & Wuttikrikunlaya, 2013).

- **Writing**

    Based on Walker & White (2013), to improve writing skill refers to help learners develop vocabulary knowledge, using appropriate language and structure. The tools used to develop writing skill are blog (e.g. Blogger and WordPress), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), Twitter, email (e.g. Gmail, et al.,) (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; Chhabra, 2012; Poore, 2013), TED Talks (Wagner, n.d.), Flickr (Barton & Lee, 2013), and Facebook (Chartrand, 2012).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Population and Sample

The population of the study was Thai EFL first-year undergraduate students. They were from a public university in 2014 academic year. The sample consisted of 150 students studying in foundation English course.

3.2 Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used as an instrument for this research. It was adapted from the study of Wozney, et al., (2006) and validated by three experts in order to ensure the validity

and reliability of the instrument. In the questionnaire, there were four parts as follows.

- Part 1: General information
- Part 2: Information about experience of using technologies in English language learning
- Part 3: Overview of tools used in English language learning

Part 4: Additional comments

3.3 Data Collection

The researcher collected the data by herself at a public university on 10-14 November 2014. 150 questionnaires were distributed to participants in order to gather the information about their personal learning environment tools they use for English language learning. Before handing out the questionnaires to students, the researcher clarified the purpose of the questionnaire and then asked them for their cooperation.

3.4 Data analysis

Descriptive analysis using SPSS program was utilized to calculate and presented in percentage.

4. Findings

To indicate their frequency of using each tool for learning and improving the major skills of English comprising listening, speaking, reading and writing respectively. The findings are shown as below.

For listening skill, Google and YouTube were the most two frequently used tools, whereas Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab and VOA Learning English were rarely or never used to learn and improve listening skill.

For speaking skill, Google and YouTube were the most two frequently used tools, whereas Voki was rarely or never used to learn and improve speaking skill. For reading skill, the most three frequently used tools were Google, Facebook, and YouTube respectively, while Delicious was rarely or never used to learn and improve reading skill. For writing skill the most three frequently used tools were Google, Facebook and YouTube respectively, whereas Flickr was rarely or never used to learn and improve writing skill.

5. Discussion

The results of the study show that Google and YouTube were the most frequently used tools to improve all skills of English by Thai students, while Facebook was used to focus on learning and developing reading and writing skills. These tools conforms to the key

characteristics of PLE which are learner control (Attwell, 2007; Van Harmelen, 2008; Jones, 2009), lifelong learning (Waters, 2008; Attwell, 2008; Renon, 2012) and various tools (Downes, 2006; Attwell, 2007; Mikroyannidis & Connolly, 2012).

Since Google, YouTube and Facebook were mainly used in English language learning, the characteristics of these tools were examined.

Google is the search engine including the world's information, webpages, images and videos. The reasons why students used Google were as follow. Firstly, they selected this tool because it is popular and easy to use confirmed by Murray & McPherson (2004). Secondly, Google has been considered as valuable resource for support independent language learning. It contributes learners to search for the information they desire through the use of keywords. (Chinnery 2008; Guo & Zhang, 2007; Hafner & Candlin, 2007; Milton, 2006; Shei, 2008a, 2008b; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004 cited in Conroy, 2010).

YouTube is a video-sharing website allowing users to upload, view, and share videos. Students used this tool because it provides a rich resource for learners to explore together with discover educational content (Walker & White, 2013). Besides, it offers fast and fun access to language, culture-based videos as well as instruction from all over the globe (Terantino, 2011). Thus, YouTube is used to learn and improve four skills of English such as enhancing vocabulary, accents, pronunciation and voice modulation (Chhabra, 2012).

Facebook is an online social networking that connects people with friends and others. It helps students to improve their reading skill, writing skill and collaborative learning (Leight, 2008). Students can share, collaborate or work as a team and critique on each other's work with easy access (Kessler, 2010; Schwartz, 2009).

On the contrary, Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab, VOA Learning English, Voki, Delicious and Flickr were not popular for students to use despite the fact that all of these tools are effective and helpful to enrich their English language skills (Dang, et al., 2012; Walker & White, 2013; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011; Barton & Lee, 2013). Based on the perspective of the researcher, it is feasible that students are not familiar with these tools or they may not know them, so they do not use these tools to learn English language.

6. Recommendations

The information gained from this study could be helpful and useful for teachers to reflect learners' belief; factual knowledge of technology; and learners' behavioral intentions as well as actions with respect to technology. From this, it could provide the effective and

potential educational tools, especially for developing learners' language knowledge and performance. For further research, researchers can conduct the qualitative research in order to get an insight into the students' attitude towards using PLE tools in English language learning.

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