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## **Portfolio Building in Chinese Language Learning Using Blogs**

### ***Abstract***

*Bilingualism is the cornerstone of our education policies. Singaporean students study both English and their native mother-tongue language. English is important not only for commerce and access to information and technology, it also enables the different ethnic groups in Singapore to communicate with one another. The mother-tongue is necessary to retain our cultural identity and values.*

*In recent years, it has been observed that the number of English-speaking homes is on the rise. Chinese students have fewer opportunities to practise Chinese language at home and they face some difficulties in learning the language. Survey findings by a local newspaper have revealed that Singapore's Chinese students are least confident in reading and writing. Extensive reading and writing are essential to the improvement of a person's language ability. In our attempt to*

*incorporate innovative learning methods, we experimented with the use of blogs in the learning of Chinese language.*

*A survey conducted 6 months after the implementation of the project uncovered positive and encouraging findings in the students' perception of learning the Chinese language, which led us to believe that blogs can be a powerful tool for second language acquisition.*

**Keywords:**

*Language learning, reflective writing, portfolio building*

## **1. Introduction**

According to the Singapore Census of Population 2000 conducted by the Singapore Department of Statistics, the ethnic distribution of Singapore's 4 million population stands at 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malays, 7.9% Indians and 1.4% Other races (4).

The Mother-Tongue languages, as spoken by the three major ethnic groups, are namely the Chinese language, the Malay language and the Tamil language. Together with the English language (EL), they form the four official languages of Singapore.

To maintain racial harmony and communication and yet allow the ethnic races to preserve their cultural roots and values, the Singapore Government has adopted a bilingual policy in all government schools since 1966. This means that all Singapore students learn both EL and their mother tongue. EL is important as the language of commerce and access to information technology and it facilitates inter-ethnic communication. The mother language is necessary to retain our cultural identity and values.

Primarily, Chinese Language (CL) is acquired through use of the language at home and formal lessons in schools. However in their report, the Chinese Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (CLCPRC) quoted a survey conducted by the Singapore's

Ministry of Education in 2004 (MOE Survey 2004), which indicated that 25.7% of Primary 2 students had parents who speak only English to them at home (52). The CLCPRC also reported that the number of Primary 1 Chinese students who spoke predominantly EL at home had risen from 36% in 1994 to 50% in 2004 (3).

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the four main aspects of language learning. Of these four, according to a survey by the local Chinese Newspaper Lianhe Zaobao, with regards to Chinese, Singapore students are least confident in reading and writing (1). We believe reasons for this are firstly, reading and writing usually require a higher mastery of a language and secondly, for most students, reading and writing Chinese is very often limited to the classroom.

Extensive reading and writing are essential to the improvement of a person's language ability. As such, in general most schools have put in place reading programmes for their students. Such programmes require students to read a certain number of books each term and, either to keep a record of the titles or to write a stipulated number of book reviews. The concept of building a reading portfolio is covered extensively by Zhu Xin Hua. The reasons for advocating students to build their own portfolios include engaging students in reflective practice, encouraging students to keep track and take responsibility for their own development and learning (2-5).

On a separate note, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched a Master plan II for IT in Education (mp2) for the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into school learning in 2002. With the completion of the first Master plan for IT in Education which focused on infrastructure setup, teachers' skills and knowledge in ICT integration, mp2 focused on ICT-enabled pedagogy. One of the goals of mp2 is to facilitate the use of ICT through

inquiry-based, problem-solving type of pedagogy enabling deep learning. It is in the hope that through ICT-enabled pedagogy, students become self-directed, independent learners, dispositions necessary for the new economy.

Integrating the above 2 tenets, a project requiring students to build their reading portfolios online using blogs was conceptualised. Harnessing the potential of blogs, this project aims to encourage our students to read, to share and comment through their reflections and in the process take charge of their own learning.

## **2. Using blogs for portfolio**

### **2.1 Portfolio building as a new learning experience**

The use of portfolio for learning is gaining recognition with educators who seek to understand their students beyond the standardised cumulative assessments. As defined by Paulson, Paulson & Meyer: “A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the students’ efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection” (60).

Portfolios have the potential to capture the holistic educational development of students and their learning process. In the process of building portfolios the ownership of learning is transferred to the students. Students take on responsibility in the formation of the portfolio and the selection & evaluation of its contents. They are aware that through the act of purposeful writing, the entries are a reflection of their identity, growth and cognition at a various stages of their lives. This offers a whole new experience for learners (Martland 2314).

Presently, book reviews are done by having students to archive their read articles and reviews in physical files or exercise books. There is little motivation for such reading activities as student are just following instructions. However, with the use of blogs, the approach and attitude to the learning task anchor on a higher motivation plane. Though students are conscious of the instructional needs and assessment, they become aware that they are writing for a wider audience, i.e. users on the world-wide-web, and the accompany responsibility that comes with it.

## **2.2 Affordances of blogs for portfolio building**

The affordances of blogs fit such student-centred pedagogic approach like a glove. With the reverse chronological arrangement and the easy archival feature, reading and searching for entries are made easy and neat. Through the choice and downloading of different '*skins*' (the aesthetic look and feel), blogs further augment the learners' identity. Blogs, when used as portfolios may "serve different purposes during the year from the purpose it serves at the end" (Paulson 62). Partially finished work can be published any time for evaluative comments and review by visitors of the blog. Teachers too can give formative feedback. Learners can then assess the validity of the feedback and weave them into the unfinished work where appropriate. Finally, at the end of the year, blogs are no longer platforms where comments and reviews are exchanged. Rather, they become knowledge artefacts exhibiting the entire developmental growth of the learners.

In the process of producing their works, learners may also pick up ICT skills and knowledge during the creation of their blogs. Depending on learners' needs, the range of skills is widespread from basic word processing to the use of multimedia incorporating videos, sounds and animations. Such skills are indispensable in today's knowledge-based economy.

### **3. Implementing our project**

#### **3.1 Implementation model**

Our experimentation in the use of blogs for reviews sought to introduce blogs to allow students to archive their journals digitally as well as share their reflection online with their peers.

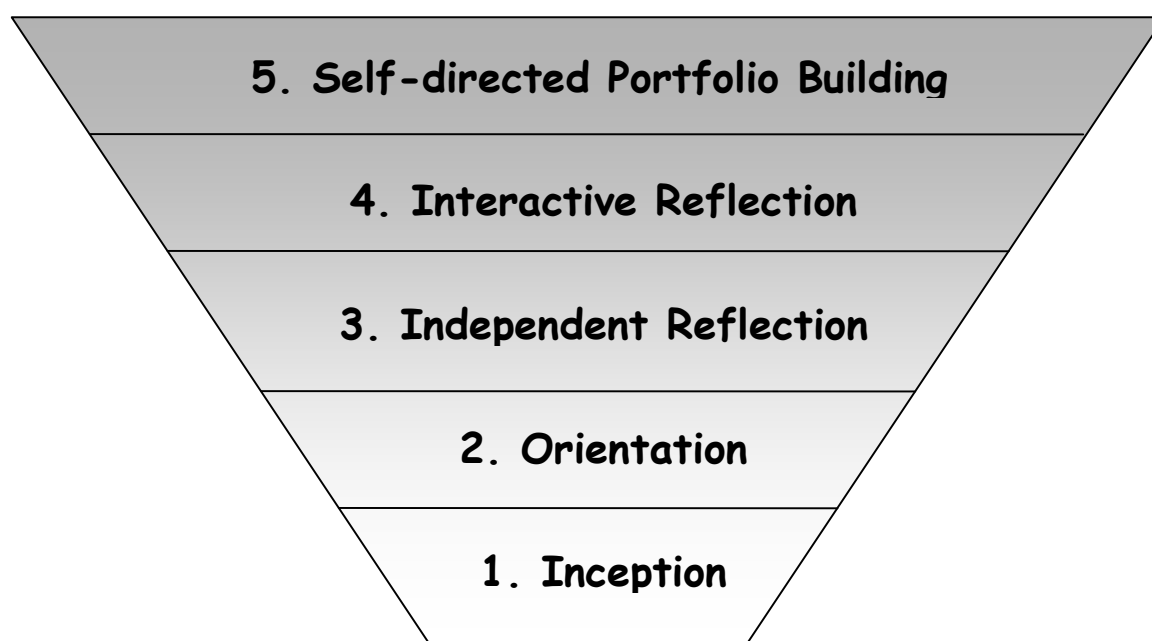
Our implementation model can be represented in a five-stage process, namely:

- Stage 1 – Inception
- Stage 2 – Orientation
- Stage 3 – Independent Reflection
- Stage 4 – Interactive Reflection
- Stage 5 – Self-directed Portfolio Building.

We developed our implementation model based on what we observed in our practice. We found that it has certain similarities with Bartlett-Bragg's 5-stage Blogging Process (6-8), as well as Salmon's Computer Mediated Conferencing (CMC) model (10). However, the foci of the models of implementation are fundamentally different.

Bartlett-Bragg's 5-stage Blogging Process describes in detail how the teacher facilitates the learning of the students by managing the expectations at different stages. Through the fifteen minutes classroom time dedicated to blogging, students developed and improved their journaling techniques, from reflective monologues to reflective dialogues to the creation of knowledge artefacts. The focus of these processes is the development of students' writing skills and to develop and acquire individual styles of writing. This 'voice' is a quality we would want to cultivate in our students after they have reached stage 5 of our processes.

Salmon's CMC model laid out a five-stage approach which provided "an example of how participants can benefit from increasing skill and comfort in working, networking and learning online, and what e-moderators need to do at each stage to help them achieve this success". Salmon's model focused on processes seen in asynchronous communication technologies such as forums, where the participants are already enrolled in the same community. Blogging, in comparison do not start off as communities. Bloggers are individuals carrying out their individual tasks, and may remain as individuals throughout, or may form communities in the future. Hence, the only similarity we have drawn is at the very initial stage.



**Fig. 1. The 5-stage Portfolio Building Process**

As the stages progress from stage 1 to stage 5, the trapezium symbolises that student ownership to learning progressively increases from stage 1 to 5. Ideally, on reaching stage 5, the teacher would have withdrawn from the portfolio building process and the students are the sole

owners of their online blogs and are responsible for the continual building of their reflections in their individual portfolio.

### **3.2 Implementation process**

Our project was carried out in two secondary schools (Grade 7-10), namely Beatty Secondary School and Nan Chiau High School, over a six-month period. A total of 72 students from two classes were involved in the experimentation. Throughout the whole project, students blogged in school as well as beyond curriculum hours. The following will describe how our students progressed as they are led from one stage to another.

#### ***Stage 1: Inception***

At the *Inception stage*, students were introduced to this innovative method of learning. They were first introduced to what blogs are, followed by an explanation of the learning process and the expected learning outcomes from the blogging activity. The concept of portfolio building was also introduced and the reasons as to why blogs were chosen as the platform were explained.

While a few students in the class were already blogging, the rest needed guidance to use the blogging interface. Blogger.com was chosen for our experimentation as it is free and more students were familiar with it. The students were guided to set up a new blog each for the purpose of the reading portfolio and to do a simple first posting after creating their blogs.

Student involvement was limited at this stage with teacher-centred instruction taking centre stage. Some students found the departure from the norm refreshing and were thus more motivated but there were others who did not see the need for this extra effort. It is crucial during this stage to repeatedly explain the objectives and benefits of this project to increase motivation.

Students also gained motivation when they found that they can make their blogs beautiful by applying different templates or *skins*.

### ***Stage 2: Orientation***

It is important to give time and allow students to orientate themselves in the blog environment. As such we did not jump too fast into the project and allowed some time for the less IT- proficient ones to catch up with the rest of the class. Other than updating their blogs, they were also grappling with changing the template and the use of the Chinese Input software. We had explicitly stated from the beginning that applying *blogskins* was not necessary. However we also realised the students wished to learn how to customise their blogs so that they could be proud of their blogs. A trial task was assigned to the students to test out their readiness. Examples of these tasks were to post a short introduction or write a short reflection on a newspaper report.

The degree of student involvement was higher than before as they began to explore the blogosphere on their own. The more IT-savvy students helped the less proficient students and this form of peer coaching was crucial throughout the project. However at this stage, the issues at hand were still mainly technical and not content based.

By the end of this stage, we had linked up the web addresses of the students' blogs and students were able to visit each other's blogs.

### ***Stage 3: Independent Reflection***

At this stage we were ready to start students on their portfolio. We provided students with a selected piece of reading material to read. The materials given included newspaper reports and literary works by both renowned Chinese authors and local authors. The students completed a

summary of the piece before they wrote their reflection. The students were initially given two weeks to complete the posting. This exercise was repeated and the window for the task was adjusted according to the students' proficiency.

#### ***Stage 4: Interactive Reflection***

Once the students were familiar with the process of blogging, they were challenged to reflect not just on their own reading but also to share their thoughts about other's reflections. The students were given the additional task to visit their friends' blogs and read the latter's reflections. They were expected to communicate their comments on the postings using the "comment" feature in the blog platform interface.

This form of interaction was not easily achievable when the students wrote their reflection on paper. The interaction would involve the exchange of physical files and books. On the internet, the potential of technologies was harnessed to facilitate such exchanges of views and knowledge. This interaction online also allowed the students to learn from multiple perspectives. They would found that although they were reading the same articles, different people derived different meanings from the same words.

#### ***Stage 5: Self-directed Portfolio Building***

Stage 5 emerges when the students are given free rein to blog their reflections on the selected reading materials as well as other readings that they can choose. They are ready to build their own portfolio that reflects their own character and thinking. Ownership of learning is slowly transferred to the students. Student initiative is important at this stage. Not all students can reach this stage at the same time and some students may continue to need supervision. Overall teacher involvement is low but should not be completely zero. Instead the teacher is

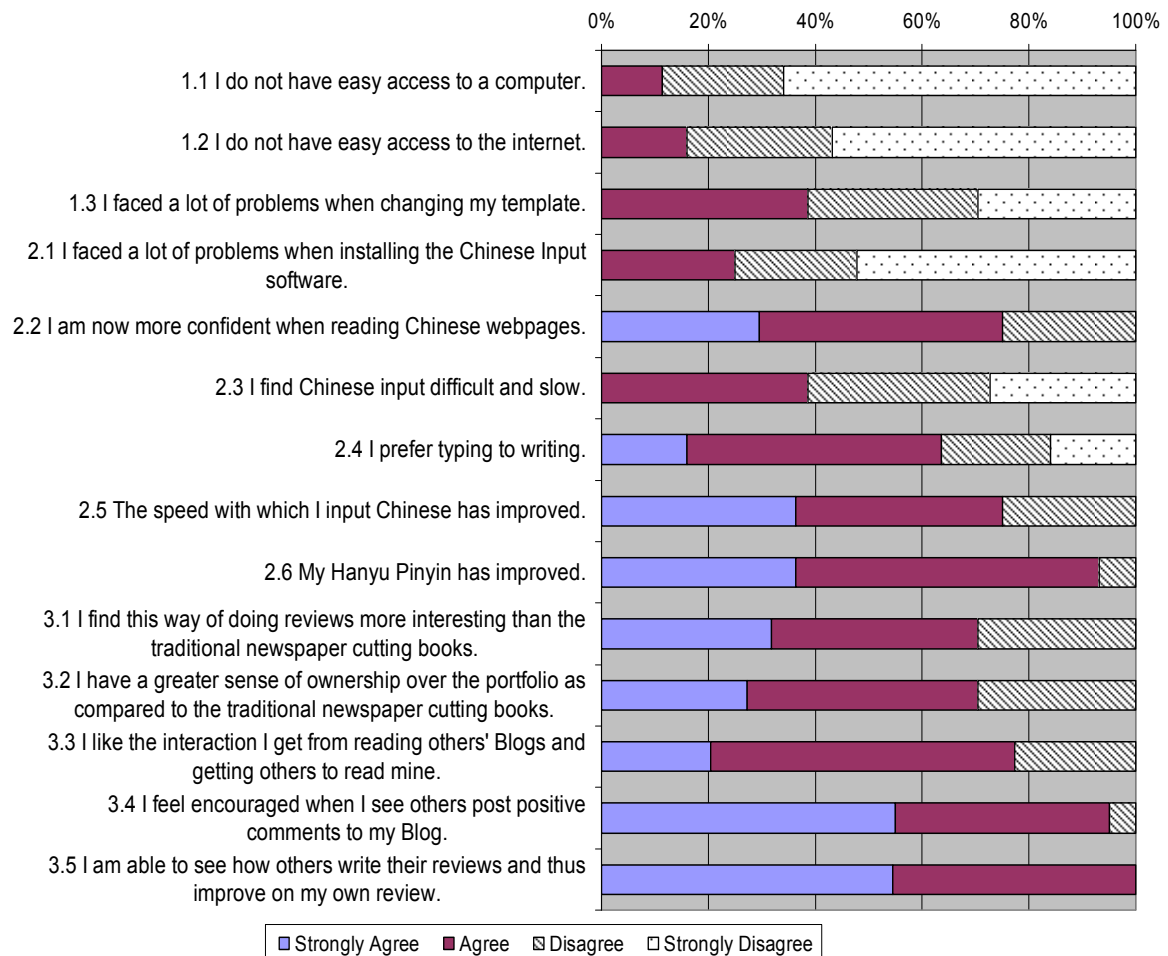
likely to be weaving in and out of the background and interacting with students just as their peers will.

For the duration of our project, not many of our students progressed to this stage of their learning. We conjecture that dispositions such as self-directed learning need time to develop and given the duration of our project, it was unrealistic to expect that from our students. We believe that given time, they will learn to take on the responsibility of learning and become self-driven.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Survey Results**

A survey was conducted after six months of implementation. We asked questions based on 3 main areas of interest. The results and analysis of the survey are as follows:



**Fig. 2. Survey Results**

Statements 1.1 to 1.3 deal with the technical issues. From the survey we find that in Singapore, permeation of ICT is high amongst our students. So infrastructure is not a big issue when implementing ICT projects. More students face difficulties when it comes to the changing of template as it requires some knowledge of HyperText Markup Language (HTML) and because of the Chinese character set requirements. Therefore the changing of template can be a double-edged sword where it may increase student motivation or decrease it depending on their level of proficiency in welding it.

Statements 2.1 to 2.6 deal with issues specific to using Chinese words in blogs. Our students input Chinese words using *Hanyu Pinyin*, a system of phonetics alphabet for representing Chinese pronunciations. Our students are generally more exposed to accessing English language resources on the computer and some of them do not have much experience accessing Chinese webpages or input Chinese words in software applications. We noted however, that although some of them faced problems when installing the Chinese Input software (25%) and quite a few find Chinese input difficult and slow (39%), at the end they still found the learning beneficial. Now a big percentage (75%) are more confident in reading Chinese webpages and feel that their speed of Chinese input has improved. Almost all of the students (93%) feel that their proficiencies in *Hanyu Pinyin* have improved.

Statements 3.1 to 3.5 deal with the benefits of the project and the responses are generally positive. The most significant statement is that 100% of the students agree that they are able to improve on their own review as they can see how others write theirs. 93% of the students agree that they feel encouraged when they see others post positive comments to their blogs. For both statements, a high 55% of the students “strongly agree” with the statements. This is a very strong indication the students feel that use of blog has benefited them. Statements 3.4 and 3.5 are also interesting in comparison with 3.1 and 3.3 because they show that even those who do not find blogging more interesting and who did not like the interaction, they agreed that they had reaped benefits from the interaction. At the same time, our findings in Statement 3.2 also showed that 30% of them were not able to establish a greater sense of ownership of their portfolios. This indicates that though students benefit from using blogs for learning in this project, there is a need for greater time and effort before students can reach stage 5 of self-direction.

#### **4.2 Problems encountered with regards to Chinese Computing**

The two major problems which have the greatest impact on our implementation were the availability of computers with Chinese input software and the non-standardisation of Chinese character encodings

### ***1. Availability of computers with Chinese input software***

Though accessibility of computers is not a major concern, we spent a considerable amount of time at the start of the project to resolve the need for Chinese input software. The general computing environment in Singapore is in English and almost all the students did not have Chinese input software installed in their home computers. Hence, although they had home access to the Internet, they still have difficulty blogging their reflections in Chinese. This difficulty is not unique to this project and is representative of the difficulty faced by the Chinese student population.

### ***2. Non-standardisation of Chinese character encodings***

Another difficulty that has inhibited the progress of computing with Chinese for many years is the non-standardisation of character set encoding. Unicode is beginning to be the standard for encoding Chinese character. However, many of our computers installed with older versions of Microsoft Windows (MS Win) do not support Unicode. This causes an encoding conflict when blog postings are done on different computers, depending on the MS Win versions that are running. A manual overwrite through menu options may overcome the problem temporarily but every time the webpage is refreshed, the manual overwrite has to be performed again.

## **5. Conclusion and future plans**

Publishing reflective commentaries on the Internet is an effective way for students to share each other's reviews. Not only will readership increase, when students see each other's works, they can learn from one another, thereby motivating them to produce better reviews. Furthermore, the creation of online portfolios on the web amounts to a showcasing of their works over the development period of their learning. Such knowledge artefacts are a display of learner's growth and reflection on their learning. When a sizeable number of interested visitors give comments and input to a blog, a community of learners may be formed.

The inclusion of the blogging process in pedagogical strategies provides opportunities to enhance reflection in learning. Crafting of specific questions in guiding student's cognition in deep learning will be the next phase of our work. With these, students can be engaged in thought processes that cultivate higher order thinking. The portfolio will thus have richer contents that demonstrate deep learning and reflection.

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