

# Teacher Support for Chinese High School EFL Students' Vocabulary Learning through Blogs

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**Abstract**—Xi'an Wuhuan High School in China has invested substantially to introduce students to blog-based vocabulary learning and integrate technology into existing curriculum. The purpose of the present study is to investigate teacher support - teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for Chinese high school EFL students' vocabulary learning through blogs. For this paper, the methodology section is discussed. There are two research techniques applied in this study. Firstly, teacher-student interaction and teachers' direction will be investigated through collecting and analyzing the content of teachers' blogs. Secondly, teacher support for students' vocabulary learning will be investigated through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

**Keywords:** teacher support, students' vocabulary learning, blogs.

## I. Introduction

### A. Background of the Study

Computer technology has long been used in the area of education (Braul, 2006). Pemberton, Borrego and Cohen (2006) state that the integration of computer technology and education not only stimulates and maintains students' interest but also makes them active in learning. It is true that the phenomenon where English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers apply CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) to their teaching has become more and more common. Specifically, in terms of using computers for vocabulary learning, Allum (2004), Ellis (1995), and Tozcu & Coady (2004) have successfully bridged the gap between

computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and L2 vocabulary acquisition. Currently, blogs can be used in vocabulary and writing classrooms among both native speakers (Barrios, 2003) and second language learners (Campbell, 2003; Pinkman, 2005). However, some teachers wonder how computer technologies are successfully applied to support students' language learning (Zou, 2013). It is believed that teacher support - teacher-student interaction (asking and answering questions between teacher and students and teacher's feedback) and teacher's direction (organizing activities like discussion and presentation) - has positive impacts on computer assisted language learning (Zou, 2013).

There are a number of studies indicating that teachers play a significant role in language learning (Dörnyei, 2001; Sugita, 2006; Tudor, 1993; Voller & Benson, 1997; Warschauer & Kern, 2000) and there are many studies arguing that teacher support positively affects students' development of language learning through computer programs (Barr, 2008; Chun & Plass, 1996; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Li, 2010; Ma & Kelly, 2006; Yoshii, 2006). In addition, there are a few studies showing that blogs can be used in students' vocabulary learning (Nation, 2001) and teacher support: teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction, is badly needed in students' vocabulary learning through blogs (Godwin-Jones, 2006).

In 2009, Xi'an Wuhuan High School, a local high school in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province of China, invested substantially and introduced students to computer-based language materials for integration into existing English curriculum. Some English teachers use a class blog to promote students' vocabulary learning. Some experienced ones in fact could share best practices with other teachers in blog-based vocabulary teaching. This became the basis

for this study.

### **B. *Statement of the Problem***

There are insufficient studies carried out to investigate expert teacher support for high school EFL students' vocabulary learning through blogs in the literature. First, there are few previous research studies focusing on Chinese high school teachers (Zhang, 2011). According to Zou (2013), many studies have not considered teacher support (what more expert teacher support) and have not involved various contexts of language teaching. Therefore, future studies should focus on a variety of language teaching contexts by adding more examples of teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction. In China, more studies on teacher support in using computer programs for vocabulary learning should be performed, for traditional teacher support such as explanation for vocabulary learning "is not enough for Chinese high school students to learn vocabulary well" (Ma, 2004, p. 1). In addition, Godwin-Jones (2006) suggests that teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for students' vocabulary learning through blogs need to be studied to improve students' vocabulary learning.

The present study thus aims to investigate Chinese high school English teachers' providing teacher support: teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for students' vocabulary learning through blogs and fill the gaps in existing literature.

### **C. *Significance of the Study***

In practice, this study can promote teacher support for English vocabulary learning through blogs. In general, it can make teachers pay more attention to the significance of teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction in using blogs for students' vocabulary learning through blogs. Last but not least, this research also makes contributions to EFL education reform in the field of vocabulary teaching for high schools.

### **D. *Theoretical Basis***

The theoretical framework used in the study is based on the ZPD Theory and Scaffolding Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). It "explains the collaborative nature of learning and how learners can develop their understanding of concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own without the help of an instructor or peers" (p. 38). According to Vygotsky (1978), scaffolding in the ZPD is the form of support provided by instructors or peers, and it is also a form of support from information communication technologies. It provides online communication tools for discourse, discussions, collaborative writing, problem-solving.

The present study, therefore, relies on the ZPD and scaffolding theory. The ZPD here is the distance between students' current vocabulary and students' potential vocabulary that could be learned from teacher support (teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction). The research focuses on investigating how the teacher interacts with students and gives directions to organize activities among students in order to support students' vocabulary learning through blogs.

### **E. *Research Questions***

The following research questions are guidelines of the present study:

1. How does the teacher interact with students for the development of vocabulary learning through blogs?
2. How does the teacher direct students for the development of vocabulary learning through blogs?

## **II. *Methodology***

### **A. *Research Site***

The research will be carried out in Xi'an Wuhuan high school which is located in the eastern part of Xi'an, China. The other research site is the online Sinablogs which become the platform for vocabulary

learning.

## **B. Participants**

Merriam (1998) suggests that purposeful sampling is the most appropriate sampling method to use in a case study and Yin (1994) notes that purposeful sampling is used to select cases that are likely to provide in-depth information for a case study. Therefore, the researchers will use purposeful sampling to select teacher participants from Xi'an Wuhuan High School. The selection criteria includes: 1) the teacher participants at least have three-year experience teaching vocabulary through blogs in or after class; 2) the teacher participants have been awarded the title; "Teaching Master" in the field of blog-based vocabulary teaching (a title for those teachers who are expert in blog-based vocabulary teaching); 3) the teacher participants often use blogs to teach vocabulary; 4) the teacher participants are willing to participate in the present study.

For this study, these persons are two English teachers from the research site who are expert in blog-based vocabulary teaching.

## **C. Research Design**

The present study is aimed at investigating teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for high school EFL students' vocabulary learning through blogs, including investigating how the teachers interact with students and how the teachers direct students in vocabulary learning through blogs. A case study design will be applied for this investigation to understand and describe teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for students' vocabulary learning through blogs. In the present study, the unit of analysis refers to two high school English teachers and their interaction with students and direction for students to develop their vocabulary.

The uniqueness of the case in this study is that the high school English teachers are experienced in interacting with students and directing students for the

development of EFL students' vocabulary learning through blogs in or after class with the title of "Teaching Master" in the field of blog-based vocabulary teaching. This title is given by the local education department to teachers who have more than three years experience in blog-based vocabulary teaching, helped students make great progress in vocabulary learning, won the first prize for blog-based vocabulary teaching competition held by the local education department, and have published at least one article in the local educational magazines or journals.

The case in this study is bounded by four criteria: 1) time: semester 2 of session 2013-2014; 2) location: Xi'an Wuhuan High School in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China and through blogs; 3) participants: two experienced English teachers in blog-based vocabulary learning; and 4) phenomenon: providing teacher support which is teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for students' English vocabulary learning through blogs.

## **D. Instruments**

Data will be collected from online documents, namely, blog posts and comments and individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews throughout the semester. There are three parts to the interview guide in this study. Part A is to obtain interviewees' background information. Part B focuses on teacher-student interaction for students' vocabulary learning through blogs and Part C is to investigate teacher's direction for students' vocabulary learning through blogs.

## **E. Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection can be conducted in the following steps. The teacher's class blogs are supported by SinaBlog. As each class blog is only accessible by students of a class, the researchers will register in SinaBlog and will be added as a member of each class blog. The researchers will then have access to every post, comment, image and hyperlink etc. Blog data will be collected and categorized under a few categories: 1)

topic: vocabulary learning in terms of pronunciation, spelling, meaning, usage, recognition in different contexts and communication in written forms; 2) format: written form including posts, comments and images; 3) time of blog entries: semester 2 of session 2013-2014.

Next, the interview is expected to last at most 2 hours each and will be administrated in a quiet, comfortable and private place, like the teacher's office, a language lab, or any room which can ensure all responses in the interview are preserved for analysis (Merriam, 1998). The medium of communication will be Mandarin to make the interviewees feel comfortable. During the process of interview, a digital recorder will be used in order to obtain an accurate record of the conversation. Meanwhile, brief note-taking is necessary in case the recorder malfunctions. The researcher intends to follow the guides yet be flexible enough to follow the conversation of the interviewees. The researchers will assure the interviewees that data provided are private and confidential.

### ***F. Data Analysis***

The class blogs will be examined to analyze 1) teacher-student interaction - asking and answering questions between teacher and students and teachers' feedback, and 2) teacher's direction like teacher's organizing various activities. Other than posts and comments by the teachers, what students' write and comment in the blogs and their use of online sources and functions including multimodality like hyperlinks, colors and images for the specific purpose of vocabulary learning will also be analyzed. The semi-structured interview recordings will be transcribed to provide more in-depth views of teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction adding depth to the online documents examination. The text data will be translated into English word by word and checked by the interviewees to see whether the translations are consistent with the opinions of interviewees because the conversations in the

interviews will be developed in Mandarin. After that, the researchers will read the transcriptions word by word and mark them line by line, trying to get a sense of the data as a whole before classifying them into categories. The transcriptions will then be read carefully again to begin the process of coding.

All data will then be organized by codes with a table of source. The researchers will organize them systematically and thoroughly to ensure dependability of the study. All data will be divided into two segments: 1) teacher-student interaction a) asking and answering questions, b) giving teacher's feedback and c) other ways of teacher-student interaction in vocabulary learning; 2) teacher's direction a) offering vocabulary tasks, b) organizing activities like discussions or presentations and c) other ways of teacher's direction in vocabulary learning. At the same time, the researcher will develop themes to accurately and logically describe the meaning of the text segments and codes. At last, a detailed description and development of themes from the data will be presented, to answer the research questions and form an in-depth understanding of teacher-student interaction and teacher's direction for students' vocabulary learning through blogs.

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