

Blogging and Developing EFL Students' English Abilities

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Abstract

The recent spread of blogs has captured language teachers' attention and blogs have become one of the most popular language learning tools. This article presents the features of blogs or weblogs that provide enough space for people to publish their work. Blogs are, therefore, used for language teaching and learning. The three types of blog which are usually applied for developing learners' English writing skills include tutor blog, learner blog and class blog. The article also states the reasons why blogs are seen as a suitable tool for language teaching.

Keywords: blogs, EFL students, English abilities

บทคัดย่อ

การแพร่หลายของบล็อกทำให้อาจารย์ผู้สอนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษหันมาให้ความสนใจมากขึ้น บล็อกจึงกลายมาเป็นเครื่องมือในการเรียนภาษาที่ได้รับความนิยมมากที่สุดอย่างหนึ่ง บทความนี้กล่าวถึงลักษณะของบล็อกหรือเว็บบล็อกซึ่งมีพื้นที่เพียงพอสำหรับให้บุคคลเข้าไปเขียนสิ่งที่ต้องการเผยแพร่ ด้วยคุณสมบัติที่น่าสนใจดังกล่าว บล็อกจึงถูกนำไปใช้ในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ โดยทั่วไปมี 3 รูปแบบ ที่อาจารย์ผู้สอนนิยมนำมาใช้พัฒนาทักษะการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษประกอบด้วย บล็อกของผู้สอน บล็อกของผู้เรียน และบล็อกของชั้นเรียน นอกจากนี้ บทความนี้ยังได้กล่าวถึงเหตุผลว่าทำไมบล็อกจึงเป็นสื่อการสอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เหมาะสม

คำสำคัญ บล็อก นักศึกษาที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ ความสามารถด้านภาษาอังกฤษ

Introduction

Basically, as English teachers, we expect our students to use English to communicate with people who speak English. The main aim of English language teaching is to improve students' ability to use English in their real life. Due to a rapid development and expansion of technology in recent years, educators and scholars have tried to find effective ways in which language learning contexts could be improved through technology. This trend has been given stronger stimulus with the development of Web 2.0 technologies and the explosion of social networking practices (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, YouTube). Both teachers and learners are being provided with new ways to cope with the limited traditional method in the field of language teaching and learning through Web 2.0 technologies.

Teachers have picked up on the creative use of this Internet technology and put the blog to work in the classroom. The education blog can be a powerful and effective technological tool for students and teachers. According to Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008), the great beneficial characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies such as low cost, accessibility, interaction and ease of use make teaching and learning using such technologies more attractive than before. Among Web 2.0 tools, blogs are applied as a powerful tool for language learning and teaching (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004). Weblog can help students develop their abilities in writing, encourage them to produce effective writing and preserve environments for students to keep on learning to write even when out of the classroom walls. For language teachers, using blogs is a creative and innovative way to teach language skills (Hashemi & Najafi, 2011).

What is a blog?

A weblog, or blog, is usually referred to a user-friendly webpage, logs of thoughts, online journals, and reflections. It is a Web publishing tool that allows people to write whatever they want and publish it. They quickly and easily publish their text and link to other blogs or websites. In addition, people who read can respond

to any given entry with a comment and even threaded discussions can take place depending on the software chosen (Campbell, 2003).

We can set up blogs just as we do with other traditional websites, with navigation links and other standard website features. To post on blogs text entries are made, similar to a diary or journal, which include a posting date and may include comments by people other than the writer, photos, links, or other digital media. Postings on blogs are often short and frequently updated. They display in reverse chronological order with most recent first and can include archived entries (Eastment, 2005; Throne & Payne, 2005; Davis & McGrail, 2009).

Blogs have been known for many years; however, they have recently been popular and consequently have been widely used for *various* purposes, including educational use. Although blogs have not been created with a view to serving educational purposes from the beginning, we can use blogs as a language learning tool to develop students' English writing skills and provide an exciting and challenging environment where they can practice English language.

Blogs are slowly becoming well known as a useful tool in the English language classroom. Blogging can be used in methods of information exchange in education (Dyrus & Worley, 2005). Blogs provide a personal space for students where they can read, write, share ideas, ask questions, hence social cohesion will be developed (Huffaker, 2005). Fortunately, blogs are surprisingly easy to use. Students only require basic technical knowledge to create and maintain their blogs. Also, blogs are flexible in design and can be changed relatively easily. When blogging, students need to be active learners, construct meaning, and organize their thoughts, both inside and outside the classroom (Du & Wagner, 2005). Blogging fosters interactive, critical thinking and collaborative skills. When students post their work on the weblog, their writing will be exposed to wider audiences beyond their classmates (Ward, 2004). Using a blog provides a real audience for students' writing. As such, students have to carefully monitor their writing before posting. Integrating blogs for educational purposes can be used to improve second language (L2) writing (Downes, 2004), to

increase students' reflective learning process (Xie et al, 2008), and to develop a L2 community of writers (Sollars, 2007). Best of all, blogs are a type of user-friendly technology. Students will find them convenient and accessible to do blogging anywhere and anytime via a smart phone, tablet or desktop computer which has access to the Internet.



Figure 1: Blogging in the ESL/EFL classroom

Source: <http://de.hpu.edu/hnguyen/Poblet.pdf>

Types of blogs used in language teaching

Obviously, tutor blogs, learner blogs, and class blogs are three types of blogs usually used in the English classroom.

The tutor blog is created and run by the teacher of a class. The content of this type of blog can be limited to syllabus, course information, homework, assignments, etc. (Stanley, 2005; McDowell, 2004). Or the teacher may choose to write about his or her life, sharing reflections about the local culture, target culture and language to stimulate online and in-class discussion. In this type of blog, students are normally restricted to being able to write comments to the teacher's posts. This type of blog serves as a resource of links for self-study.

The learner blog is what an individual student creates and runs. This type of blog becomes the learners' own personal online space. They can post their thoughts related to their reading. Moreover, through blogging students will be encouraged and enjoy writing frequently about any topics that interests them. They can also post comments on other students' blogs. Hence, it encourages students to express their thoughts or feelings and students' sense of ownership will be developed. According to Stanley (2005), blogging makes students more concerned about their writing. They want their writing to look right and usually realize the value of rewriting their assignments. As students are offered the opportunity to read and post, blogs also serve as students' online portfolio which enables them to archive their previous written work, for example, and evaluate the progress made during a writing course. As a consequence, this type of blog is the most suitable tool for reading and writing classes.

The class blog is the last type of blog; it is a shared space by both a teacher and students (Campbell, 2003; McDowell, 2004; Stanley, 2005). Students, as a whole class, will use this type of blog to work collaboratively. The class blog is best used as a collaborative discussion space or an extra-curricular extension of the classroom. Students can be encouraged to post messages, images and links related to classroom discussion topics. Furthermore, the class blog can facilitate project-based learning, and it can be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange (Campbell, 2003).

Why using the blogs in English classroom

Recently, interest in using blogs in the classroom is also gaining popularity because of the rapid development and advancement of technology. Using blogs has also increased in English language classroom. The use of computer technology as a tool for language learning has been fully supported by most of educational institutions. According to Noytim (2010), many English teachers have asserted that there are several reasons why weblogs are an effective tool for developing English

language teaching and learning. Blogging provides students with an authentic communication and learning environment. When doing writing practice, teachers are not only the audience, but the audiences are also students' friends including other people outside the classroom, a global audience. As a result, students can be motivated to write more through blogging, both academic and non-academic writing work. Through blogs, students can write and comment on their friends' writing. They can discuss and share their common interests and individual differences. Students can receive feedback from other audiences; they have an opportunity to read material in which they are interested and write on subjects they really want to when using blogs (Aljamah, 2012). Likewise, Dawns (2004) shows that students' writing skills will be improved through using blogs in writing classes. Nadzrah and Kemboja (2009) point out that blogs let students produce their writing work with specific purposes.

When compared to discussion boards, blogs are a much more practical application in classroom. Based on Kirk and Johnson's experience of using class blogs in 22 classes over a three year time frame, they found that blogs were useful. That is, a blog is controlled by the person who creates it, while others can make a comment but cannot create blogpost content if they are not given administrative access (Kirk & Johnson, 2009). Similarly, Asllani, Ettkin, and Somasundar (2008) indicate that blogs appear more successful than discussion boards in communicating tacit knowledge.

The effectiveness of blogs has been found in many studies. Smith (2009) conducted the qualitative action research project to examine the experiences of high school English language learners as they created personal weblogs and responded to queries on a class weblog. She found that the data from the project demonstrate that blogging as a classroom writing activity is effective in helping students to obtain, process and construct the English language. In the same vein, Shen (2013) conducted a quasi-experimental study in a Chinese university to compare the effects between traditional in-class process-oriented writing instruction and blog integrated writing instruction. She found that integrating blogs in writing instruction assisted the students achieve a better writing performance. Thus, the claim that blogs may promote more effective writing instruction is proven. Also, in the study conducted by Tseng (2008)

investigating the effects of weblogs in English classes of 55 Taiwanese students majoring in Medical Image & Radiological Sciences showed that students formed positive attitudes toward blogs. Blogs have a great deal of advantages in terms of writing practice, free writing, and peer learning.

Furthermore, based on my experience of developing writing abilities of English as a foreign language (EFL) students through blogging, I asked students in groups of four to each create a blog. They worked together for 12 weeks to produce six writing assignments. Each member in the group worked through providing comments, editing and revising on the blog until the group had a final writing assignment and submitted that to the teacher for grading. The results of my study revealed that after the students worked together on weblogs, their English writing mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest, and they had positive attitudes towards using weblogs in learning. Regarding cooperative learning experiences through using weblogs, most students thought that it was a new experience to work with their friends on the weblogs (Kitchakarn, 2014).

Due to the many advantages of blogs mentioned earlier, teachers are encouraged to use blogs in their classroom. One of the best points of integrating blogs in the English classroom is to provide a real audience for student writing. Normally, students' writing will be read by only one person, with a focus on form, not content. When using blogs, students can find themselves writing for a real audience that, apart from the teacher, may include their peers, students from other classes, or even other countries, their parents, and potentially anyone with access to the Internet. By the same token, using blogs as a learning tool in English instruction will provide students with a number of opportunities to express and share their ideas with their language community, to connect the people around the world and let them show their interest, ideas and experiences with each other in real-time, to integrate into a new world of interconnected media collaborative relationships with language learning facilitators (Blackstone et al., 2007; Leverett, 2006). Furthermore, weblogs also allow learners with little technological sophistication to be exposed to many different types of audiences even when technology was not part of their daily lives (Minugh, 2008).

Through blogging students are integrated into the world of interconnected media, thus they become familiar with the blogging environment both as a reader and as a writer. When writing through blogging, students can develop their critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy (Richardson, 2004). Students can reflect on what they are thinking and writing, and engage readers and audience in a maintained conversation that leads to further writing. Also, students learn how to search for information on the Internet, read and try to understand the information. In response to their reading, they will post their opinions on their blogs or leave their comments to the original blogs. While self-publishing on weblogs, the content and structure of their writing will be more responsible and care taken by the writer students because they are concerned that their writing will be read by a real audience (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

Conclusions

Blogs, as an educational tool, may be used in a multi-aspect manner to accommodate all students. In terms of educational purpose, blogs can be used at least for the following basic functions.

Classroom Management: Students will be fostered with a sense of a community of a classroom through class blogs; they can serve as a portal for a community of learners. Students will be informed about classroom announcements or requirements, handouts, notices, and homework assignments can be posted on a class blog, or they can act as a question and answer board.

Collaboration: teachers and students can work together to improve writing or other skills with the advantage of an authentic audience. Teachers can offer instructional tips and feedback. Moreover, students can practice and benefit from peer feedback. They can work in groups cooperatively through blogging.

Discussions: students are provided with the opportunity to discuss topics outside of the classroom. Through blogging, everyone has an equal opportunity to share their ideas, thoughts and comments. Students have time to be reflective and

reactive to one another. Teachers can also bring together a group of knowledgeable individuals for a given unit of study for students to network and conference with on a blog.

Student Portfolios: blogs present, organize, and protect student work as digital portfolios. As older entries are archived, developing skills and progress may be analyzed more conveniently. Additionally, as students realize their efforts will be published, they are typically more motivated to produce better writing. Teachers and peers may conference with a student individually on a developing work, and expert or peer mentoring advice can be easily kept for future reference.

Clearly, using blogs in the English classroom is a new motivating and exciting learning experience which enhances students' creative and critical thinking skills. Blogging provides opportunities for students to be exposed to various social interactions; between teachers and students, students and their peers, and students and global audiences. Students are active learners through the blogging system, thus using blogs in the language classroom is beneficial and suitable for undergraduate students to enhance their writing performances. To derive the most out of using blogs, teachers should take a survey on what tools to employ in creating blogs as there are a huge number of hosting platforms. Managing blogs is also another aspect to be considered when deciding to have one as it is most beneficial when blogs are regularly updated and timely responses are also needed. Using Rich Site Summary (RSS) feed can help save time to check any new postings, and teachers can choose to give feedback in class. Like any other posting on the Internet, students should be taught to be aware of the rules of online posting as well as the negative side of the digital footprint in order to stay safe.

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