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Blogging: a Powerful Tool for State EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Blogging experience seems to be vital for young generations who live in the age of internet technology. The ability of both the teacher and learners to easily update an online diary promotes blogging as a new form of communication towards enhancing class interaction and creating a community outside the classroom. Blogging activities enable learners to become more independent in their learning and provide opportunities for communicating in English in a meaningful and genuine context. In this regard, blogging offers a new and powerful toolkit for the support of foreign language learning by creating an amazing and friendly community for sharing ideas, social activity and critical thinking.

Key-words: blogging, collaboration, autonomy, critical thinking, language skills

Introduction

A 'blog' (or web log) is a website in which items are posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order. Authoring a blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called 'blogging'. 'Blogging' - a contraction of the term 'web logging' - has emerged in many educational contexts as a vehicle for integrating face-to-face and online modes of learning and is a new and innovative technological tool which can be used in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom to support learning by relying on learners' (Ls) interests and familiarity with online communication.

The process of reading online, engaging a community and reflecting it online is a process of bringing life into learning (Richardson, 2006). A teacher's blog can be used as a personal library where Ls can find reference books, extra-curricular and leisure activities which cater for the group's special needs and interests. In this way, blogs may foster Ls' autonomy and encourage them to go further on their EFL studies, to practice their language skills while expressing themselves and to establish a stronger affective bond with the teacher. A blog is also a space where Ls and parents can find information about the EFL course syllabus, homework assignments, assessment (Stanley, 2005).

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the potential of blogging to effectively support classroom learning and to outline the suitability of blogging for foreign language (FL) education. In particular, blogging is a 'social activity' which has the potential to be a transformational technology for FL teaching and learning in the Greek state schools by enhancing EFL learners' sense of autonomy and perception of FL development in a stimulating, creative and interactive way.

Theoretical review: blogging and EFL learning

Johnson (2004) points out that the application of blogs is a useful supplemental aid to EFL teachers. From any computer connected to the internet, teachers can create, edit, or delete their teaching handouts such as notes, homework assignment, and review materials. All these teacher's posts can be organized in a reversed chronological order with the latest

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postings on the top. EFL teachers can, thus, easily use blogs to organize a collaborative learning environment in which Ls can peer edit others' postings (Mitchell, 2003).

A number of research studies have explored the use of blogs in EFL learning and have indicated that their online nature and user-friendly characteristics can encourage Ls' self-expression in English (Harwood, 2010; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004; Zhang, 2009). In particular, Harwood (2010) notes that blogs are a useful and adaptable learning aid that can promote learner-centered learning through blog activities and assignments that encourage Ls to communicate closely within their groups. Trajtemberg and Yakoumetti (2011) list several benefits of blogs for EFL learning which include the scaffolding that is promoted by having less knowledgeable Ls interacting with their more advanced peers while the autonomy and empowerment provided fosters Ls' confidence and desire to use the FL. In a similar vein, Illés (2012) claims that blogs are able to create conditions for improving language skills as well as the development of autonomy in terms of both learning and language use. This assertion is also confirmed by Noytim's study (2010) which shows that blogging promotes Ls' autonomy through a learner-centred approach which encourages Ls to read and write for communicative purposes as it reinforces EFL learning in contexts where Ls have limited exposure to the target language.

Several researchers agree that blogs can promote collaboration (Flatley, 2005; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Oravec, 2002). More specifically, in a school context, blogs can be used as 'online diaries' where Ls write about their own experiences or share their ideas related to course topics. However, the power of a blog comes when Ls interact with an individual's posts, creating a forum for discussion and conversation. According to Grewling (2004), the main reason for using blogs in FL teaching is that they invite participation and have the potential to democratize the classroom since each learner is given the chance to participate equally. In light of the above, blogs can provide an exciting and motivating learning environment where Ls have a sense of ownership and readership by enhancing their analytical and critical thinking skills, creating social interactions between Ls and the instructor, Ls and their peers as well as Ls and a global audience (Oravec, 2002).

Benefits of blogging for developing EFL skills

Blogs prove to be a powerful tool for EFL learning particularly in developing reading and writing skills. More specifically, findings suggest that the sense of ownership in the blogging process encourages Ls to write more freely as they are engaged in fluency work, rather than accuracy work (Noytim, 2010). In other words, they focus on meaning rather than forms and the writing becomes meaningful in an authentic environment thus increasing Ls' interest, motivation and confidence in writing. Moreover, according to Noytim (2010), Ls' awareness of a 'real' audience with weblogs being publicly accessible encourage them to monitor their writing and develop writing strategies such as planning their writing, reference checking in terms of grammar and spelling, and making sure their writing would convey the meaning they intended. Another empirical study (Vurdien, 2011) gives some insight into how blogs can contribute towards the enhancement of writing skills, the encouragement provided by peer feedback and the fostering of collaborative skills while at the same time, due to its interactive nature, raises Ls' level of motivation. A further study reveals that blogging writing is more effective than class writing instruction (Taki & Fardafshari, 2012). Taki and Fardafshari's findings derived from pre and post tests show that blogging collaboration has a positive effect on the structure and content of Ls' writings as demonstrated in their writing in the form of improved sentence length, sentence structure, and creativity in writing. Other findings of this empirical study indicate that the

writing performance of the low-level Ls comparing with the high-level Ls noticeably improves which is consistent with Nadzrah's study (2007). In both cases, data show that blogs reduce barriers of writing and Ls feel more confident to write when they know that other members could read and give feedbacks on blog. Hence, writing on blogs provides an opportunity for Ls' self-improvement as they have the chance to learn the FL on their own and to monitor their learning progress.

In addition, Ls' beliefs of collaborative writing and online means of communication along with feedback received from online peers are very positive according to a study administered by Tanti (2012). These findings are reflective of results from similar empirical studies conducted by Jones (2004), Walsh (2009), Kelly and Safford (2009), whose research also concurs that blogs do develop the skills and strategies that are involved in EFL writing.

Regarding reading skills, in contrast to the traditional EFL classroom where Ls have limited exposure to authentic materials, blogging offers teachers ready-to-use mechanisms for selecting authentic online texts as course materials, introducing reading strategies that strengthen L2 reading processes, and monitoring Ls' reading performance (Huang, 2013). The use of the class blog allows for the: a. practice of reading outside the classroom, b. reading strategies reinforcement by means of additional exercises, acquisition, activation and development of knowledge about a given topic through content-based learning, c. continuous interaction among classmates and teachers, d. help among peers, e. creation of a sense of community and ownership of the website where the exchanges take place, f. establishment of a real audience who reads and writes about the given subjects which could be deemed personal, interesting. Moreover, the reading texts might be produced by a teacher or by other Ls and can be adjusted to be relevant to Ls in terms of language level or their interests providing extra reading practice.

Last but not least, as Noytim (2010) points out, surveys show that the majority of Ls are in favor of using blogs mainly because it is a tool for building social communication between readers and writers. For instance, the major result of an empirical study conducted by Wu and Wu (2011) reveals that weblog is a tool which can develop different strategies of learning like critical thinking. Furthermore, the majority of Ls feel that reading blogs help improve their EFL reading skills because they learn new vocabulary; they can read in English faster and more fluently; their grammar is improved and their reading comprehension is enhanced. Another study designed to explore the nature of literary responses as communicated via weblogs reveals that Ls learn more about the thinking and reading processes and, consequently, increase their level of engagement (West, 2008).

Conclusion

Blogs create a learner-centered learning environment whereby Ls can interact actively to practice English beyond the traditional classroom. Blogs can help Ls share what they have learned and help one another as they become more autonomous in their own learning and less dependent on their teachers. Most survey results are supportive and encouraging indicating that with a well-organized instructional design, a blog definitely is a powerful tool for EFL teachers. Hence, state EFL teachers should use blogs in order to motivate and encourage guided discovery and knowledge in the target language. More importantly, extending contact between EFL teachers and Ls through blogging could provide a practical, interactive and safe way towards effective EFL learning in a real-life and genuine context.

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