



## BLOGS AND THEIR USE IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE FOR ENGINEERS

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### ABSTRACT

*Within the context of English as a second language specially for engineers, using blogs has emerged as a language learning tool. However, how teachers effectively incorporate blogs within the confines of an instructional framework and what the current research shows about using blogs as a learning tool remain unsolved issues. Thus, the current paper presents a review of the research on the use of blogs in learning contexts. The study first introduces blogs and a theoretical framework for the use of blogs within the borders of the constructivist approach. Then, in accordance with the studies reviewed, the research is divided into the following sections: blogs and their types, their effect on interaction and communication, basic language skills, learners' motivation, perceptions and attitudes, and autonomous learning. In conclusion, while the current literature reflects that using blogs is a valuable and effective technique that can be readily used in the context of EFL, more research is necessary. Finally, the paper ends with practical recommendations for S teachers and researchers.*

**Key Words:** *Blog, blogging, blogger, teaching, English language, second language, perception, motivation, recommendation*

### INTRODUCTION

During recent years, using blogs has emerged as a language learning tool, and accordingly, this technique has come to constitute an important place within the context of English language learning. A blog is a site or online journal published on the World Wide Web (WWW) for discussion or informational purposes in a reverse chronological order (Blood, 2000; Dyrud et al., 2005; Kajder & Bull, 2004). Blogs that interactively allow their visitors to leave comments and messages (Mutum & Wang, 2010) consist of web-based journals that are easily linked and cross-linked in online communities (Goodwin-Jones, 2003) or discrete



entries or posts that are created by single individuals, small groups or multiple authors. Blogs are themed around certain topics (Kajder & Bull, 2004), and they allow bloggers to create social relations with their readers (Gaudeul & Peroni, 2010), to use unrestricted time and place (Dyrud et al., 2005), and to give personal responses to articles (Jacobs, 2003).

While most blogs are textual, a blog typically combines texts, images, videos and links to other blogs and focuses on specific areas such as art (artblogs), photographs (photoblogs), videos (videoblog or vblog), music (MP3blogs), audio (podcasts) or microblogs that feature very short posts. Blogs that are used as instructional resources or for educational purposes are referred to as edublogs. Though blogs are not directly intended for educational purposes and uses, they have drawn attention from ESL educators as they constitute a tool for creating journals without requiring any experience or knowledge about computer programming (Wu, 2006), and they serve as a learning tool with the context of learning a language learning (de Almeida Soares, 2008).

## TYPES OF BLOGS USED IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Aaron Campbell (2003) has outlined three types of blogs for use with language classes:

**The Tutor Blog** is run by the teacher of a class. The content of this type of blog can be limited to syllabus, course information, homework, assignments, etc. 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. A great example of this is Aaron Campbell's own 'The New Tanuki' <http://thenewtanuki.blogspot.com/>

**The Class Blog** is a shared space, with teacher and students being able to write to the main area. It is best used as a collaborative discussion space, an extra-curricular extension of the classroom. Students can be encouraged to reflect in more depth, in writing, on themes touched upon in class. Students are given a greater sense of freedom and involvement than with the tutor blog. A very good example of what has been done with this type of blog is Barbara Dieu's 'Bee Online' <http://beonline.blogspot.com/>) and 'Bee Online 2' <http://beonline2.blogspot.com/>

**The Learner Blog** is the third type of blog and it requires more time and effort from the teacher to both set up and moderate, but is probably the most rewarding. It involves giving each student an individual blog. The benefit of this is that this becomes the student's own personal online space. Students can be encouraged to write frequently about what interests them, and can post comments on other students' blogs. For examples, see the links to learner blogs from the class blog and tutor blog examples above. Of course, teachers who decide to



use blogs often use a combination of Tutor or Class blog and Learner blogs, with hyperlinks connecting them.

## WHY BLOG?

So, why should a teacher blog with students? There are many reasons why a teacher may choose to use weblogs with students. One of the best reasons is to provide a real audience for student writing. Usually, the teacher is the only person who reads student writing, and the focus of this reading is usually on form, not content. With weblogs, 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. Here are some other reasons for using blogs:

- To provide extra reading practice for students .
- As online student learner journals that can be read by their peers .
- To guide students to online resources appropriate for their level.
- To increase the sense of community in a class .
- To encourage shy students to participate.
- To stimulate out-of-class discussion .
- To encourage a process-writing approach.
- As an online portfolio of student written work.
- To help build a closer relationship between students in large classes .
- A blog is another tool that can help bring students together.

## WHERE TO START

There are lots of sites where you can set up a blog for free, but perhaps the best known and one of the most reliable and simple blogging tools to use with students is Blogger (<http://blogger.com>). It takes only fifteen minutes from setting up an account to publishing the first post using this valuable tool. The teacher sets up the tutor blog or a class blog. With a Class blog, students will need to be invited to participate by e-mail. Learner blog accounts can either be set up beforehand by the teacher, or done at the same time with a whole class in a computer room. The former gives the teacher more control of student accounts, but some advantages of the latter is that learners are given more choice (of username, design of the blog, etc) and a greater sense of 'ownership' of their new virtual writing space.

## TIPS FOR MANAGING LEARNER BLOG SETTINGS



Use the 'Settings' in Blogger to add yourself (under Members) as Administrator of the learner blog. This is invaluable if students later forget usernames or passwords, and can also help if inappropriate posts are published. Make sure you change the setting and turn the 'Comments' feature on. This will allow the others to respond to things the students write on their learner blogs. Also in 'Settings', you will find an option to receive an email whenever a student publishes their blog. This will save you time regularly checking learner blogs to see if any of your students have posted. Another way of being informed of this is to use the 'Site Feed' function.

## KEEPING STUDENTS INTERESTED

Many teachers who start to use blogs find the novelty factor is enough to create student interest in starting to use them. However, blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. If learners are not encouraged to post to their blogs frequently, then they can quickly be abandoned. A failed experiment. Here, the teacher in the role of facilitator is vital for maintaining student interest. Here are some ideas to how this can be done:

- Respond to student posts quickly, writing a short comment related to the content. Ask questions about what the learner writes to create stimulus for writing.
- Students should be actively encouraged to read and respond (through the commenting feature of the blog) to their classmates.
- Writing to the blog could be required, and it may form part of the class assessment. Students should be encouraged to post their writing homework on the blog instead of only giving it to the teacher.

## SOME IDEAS FOR ACTIVITIES

**Mystery guest.** Invite another teacher or someone from another school or country as a mystery guest to your blog. Ask the students to engage him or her in dialogue and guess their identity.

**Project work.** A blog is an ideal space for developing a project, especially if the project is a shared one between several classes or even classes in different countries.

**International link-ups.** Contact another educational establishment to see if they are interested in a joint blogging project. Students can write about their lives, culture, interests, etc, and be encouraged to read about the other class and respond by writing comments.



**Photoblog.** If you plan on using photographs in your blog, there are lots of tools available to help you. Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>) makes publishing photographs to blogs easy. If you want to make photographs central to the blog, however, it is better to use a blogging tool such as Buzznet (<http://www.buzznet.com>), which is a photo publishing tool and blog rolled into one.

## HOW TO START BLOGGING IN ELL CLASSROOMS

It's probably best to start planning on incorporating blogging in your classroom sometime before the term begins. In this way, the process of integrating it into your schedule becomes less overwhelming, and much more manageable. There are several ways to use blogging in your classroom:

**Blogging for Students :** A student blog can have many purposes in an ELL classroom; Discussions, Responses, Reflections, Sharing images, links, and resources, Vocabulary and grammar activities, Paragraph writing, Commentary, Storytelling

These are just a few examples of what students can do with blogging. There are some great platforms for student blogs, such as Kidblog, Edublogs, Blogger, and even Write About, which is a publishing platform that allows groups (or classes) to post publicly and privately. To choose the right platform for you and your students, set aside some time to experience and create your own "example" blog. This example blog will not go to waste, because you'll use it to share with your students when introducing them to blogging.

Here are some **content suggestions**: Information about class, assignments, daily routine, tasks, etc. Discussion and comments forum, Class photos and videos, Photos and videos of resources related to class work, Interesting articles and stories, Vocabulary lists, Links to resources, games, and fun ways to learn English Cultural stories written by students.

## HOW OFTEN SHOULD STUDENTS BLOG?

This can be determined by the teacher and students as they see fit within the learning outcomes they're trying to accomplish. However, blogging consistently about the course discussions, materials, and content will allow students to delve into a deeper self-reflective process. They'll be able to trace their learning through their blogs and may be able to use them as studying material. Many students will end up using their blogs after the course or term has ended, and likely will maintain the same level of professionalism to build their digital identity.



## HOW CAN PEERS AND TEACHERS PROVIDE FEEDBACK?

Feedback is an essential part of blogging. Since blogging is a very reflective process, students will need to stay engaged. The feedback provided by their peers or the teacher can be very valuable in providing this type of reflective engagement throughout the learning process. When ELL students work on peer feedback, there are several areas on which they can focus:

- Share one positive thing about the post.
- Share one thing their peers can work on or improve.
- Share a personal story that relates to the blog post.

For teachers, it's best to give constructive criticism on students blogs privately. That way, the conversation does not hinder the student's writing and thought process. By focusing on only the positive comments that a student receives on his or her blog post, the teacher can encourage and motivate that student to continue blogging and publicly sharing thoughts.

## BENEFITS OF BLOGGING

**Interaction and Communication :** Research shows that the use of blogs plays an important role in developing interactions among students and between teachers and students in the target language. Yiakoumetti (2011) identified the interaction strategies among undergraduate EFL students regarding teacher- and student-initiated interactions and find that the use of blogs promotes self-expression, interaction, self-evaluation, and language progress. According to some research reports, blogging provides opportunities for communication in the target language. Warschauer and Liaw (2011) stated that emerging technologies, such as wikis and blogs, provide flexible means for developing language and literacy skills through collaboration and communication.

**Basic Language Skills :** Studies on the effects of blogging mainly focus on reading and writing skills and show that blogging enhances these skills. However, very few studies have been conducted with respect to the effects of blogging on speaking skills. Ducate and Lomicka (2005) suggested some ideas such as writing weekly summaries, recording vocabulary, exploring hyperlinks, reading journals, describing pictures, exchanging blog addresses and posting on cultural topics as ways to improve reading and writing skills.

**Speaking skills :** A fairly limited number of studies on the effects of blogging on speaking skills show that blogs are effective tools for developing conceptualization brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, evaluating, self-presentation and information exchange skills; however, these studies show that blogging has no effects on improving learners' fluency,



accuracy, pronunciation, or language complexity. First, Sun (2009), in a study that presents findings on using blogs as a platform for language learners' speaking skills, noted that blogging develops skills conceptualization, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, evaluating, self-presentation and information exchange skills.

**Reading skills:** While the extant research indicates that the use of blogs enhances reading processes, causes positive perceptions of reading, encourages classroom discussions, and develops literacy and critical thinking skills, there is little evidence to support that blogs positively affect learners' reading skills.

**Writing skills:** Studies that focus on using blogs to improve writing skills show that blogs can be easily integrated into a virtual ESL writing environment (Murray & Hourigan, 2008). Research also demonstrates that integrating blogs into portfolios or eportfolios contributes to more effective writing, as noted by Klages and Clark (2009) in their study that integrates e-portfolios and blogs, whereas Godwin-Jones (2008) stated that using portfolios as a tool for practicing language skills has the ability to link to blogs. Research shows that blogging enhances expository, narrative, persuasive and argumentative writing. Furthermore, the use of blogs to enhance writing skills facilitates the revision of written materials, the giving and receiving of feedback, and the participation in peer-review activities.

**Motivation, perceptions, and attitudes:** From a broader perspective, research shows that the blogging context is a factor that affects bloggers' affective states. For example, Subrahmanyam et al. (2009) examined the connection between adolescents' communications within blogs and their developmental processes, finding that adolescents who use blogs reflect off-line themes in their blogs. Accordingly, they suggest that the learners' online and off-line contents are interrelated in a psychological context. The research indicates that the use of blogs has considerable effects on learners' levels of motivation.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

From this study on the use of blogs in ESL learning, several conclusions can be drawn. First, blogging as a language learning strategy makes significant contributions to enhancing learners' cultural knowledge and cultural awareness about the target society. In addition, the use of blogs enhances learners' cultural interactions, competencies and exchanges. Second, blogging plays an important role in developing learners' interactions and communications in the target language. Third, blogs are effective tools for developing speaking, reading and writing skills. However, with respect to speaking skills, while blogs are effective for developing skills related to conceptualization, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, evaluating, self-presentation and information exchange, they have no effect on fluency,



accuracy, language complexity, or pronunciation. Furthermore, the research indicates that the use of blogs enhances reading processes, results in positive perceptions of reading, encourages classroom discussions, and develops literacy and critical thinking skills. However, the use of blogs has little effect on learners' reading test results. Blogging positively affects learners' writing performance, their ability to monitor writing, their attitudes towards and perceptions of writing, and their interactions and participation in writing. More specifically, blogs are effective for developing rhetorical strategies, improving grammar skills, designing paragraphs and essays, revising written works, giving and receiving feedback and participating in peer review activities. The use of blogs also facilitates academic writing and enhances the sharing and exchanging of knowledge, provides a learning space for learners' to interact, allows for reflection on learning, develops autonomous learning, and improves self expression. The use of blogs has also been found to considerably enhance learners' motivation, to affect positively students' perceptions of learning, and to result in positive attitudes towards learning. However, one study found that students have both negative and positive views regarding blogging. Finally, blogs have been found to enhance autonomous learning and knowledge and information sharing while also serving as a learning space for students.

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