



BLOGGING BANDWAGON FOR LANGUAGE ENHANCEMENT

Dr. Jyoti Patil

Principal & Head, Dept. of English
Renuka College
Besa, Nagpur-37(MS).

Abstract

My paper deals with effective use of various blogs which can be of great help to the computer savvy generation of teachers and students. To make teaching of English language more interactive and learning a fun experience, most of the learning centres are opting for Technology-enabled smart classes where digital black boards, audio-visual rooms and interactive sessions have replaced traditional blackboards, chalks, notebooks and textbooks. The tech-savvy students not only enjoy their studies through these new methodologies but also actively participate in the interactive learning process. Audio-visual rooms, e-boards and knowledge centres are adding a new dimension to the teaching style. A blog is a major contribution in the field of web-based tools. Blogs are the perfect way for students to develop their writing skills. Earlier students wrote written responses to literature in journals. Now with the help of blogs students can comment online on literary journals and also on other student's blogs. The teacher can also involve in blogging by adding his/her comments. Any student or learner of English can jump into the blogging bandwagon and can explore and add new dimensions to the instruction by the teacher. V-blogs are also being used for educational purposes to disseminate the developed material for further improvement, innovations and research.

Learners can be encouraged to create poetry blogs, fiction blogs, Class blogs, Group blogs, and learner blogs. Blogging has thus revolutionized the whole world of communication where information moves online at warp speed.

Key words: *blogging, V-blogs, e-board, audio-visual rooms, knowledge, centres.*

Introduction

Today computer based technology is playing a major role in English language teaching and learning. The beginning of this trend can be traced to the thirties when teachers used audio-visual tools to teach English content in the classroom. Later, the use of audio recordings, television, films, video, and computers in the trials to bring the English language and culture to





students in the Sixties has made technology linked closer to language teaching. Then, the shift of language teaching pedagogy during the 1980s to 2000s to communicative language teaching, with a focus on cooperative group learning, and student engagement in authentic, meaningful, and interactive contextualized discourse (Warschauer, 2000), necessitates more sophisticated educational technologies, and the internet and its related applications seem to be a good response to meet this need. One of the most recent but rapidly popular internet applications is the weblogs, (also known as blogs). Although blogs began to exist in the cyberspace community in 1998, the release of Blogger, a free blog hosting service, in August of 1999 fostered the rapid growth of blog sites (Blood, 2000). In December 2007, blog search engine and measurement firm *Technorati* was tracking more than 112,000,000 blogs and 120,000 new blogs were created every day. In the beginning of 2009 *Technorati* estimated the number of blogs was over 200 million. This paper provides a theoretical justification for the implementation of blogging and related activities within a class and composition program. This paper does not, however, investigate whether the use of blogging activities affects the quality of student writing.

Blogging: A pedagogical perspective

A blog is basically a web-based space for posting and interacting. It is a personal diary and a collaborative space where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet.

A blog is a web page that contains brief, discrete hunks of information called posts. These posts are arranged in reverse-chronological order (the most recent posts come first). Each post is uniquely identified by an anchor tag, and it is marked with a permanent link that can be referred to by others who wish to link it. (Powers et. al. 2002, p. 1)

According to Williams & Jacobs (2004), "...'Blogs' have evolved along similar lines to other forms of human communication in that they are a product of convenience rather than design" (p. 232). Lamshed, Berry, & Armstrong (2002) connect blogging with journal writing, stating that "like a journal, a blog can be a continually updated resource that grows over time with the accumulation of writing and other content. This archived information is accessed using a simple calendar that highlights the dates on which entries were made" (p. 9). Blogging, since its inception as a manner of producing anything from online diaries to academic and reflective journals, emerged to have the capacity to "engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 232). Thus, a Blog is an online journal, a personal diary, a collaborative space in which you can share with the world.





Blogging in language learning

When a language teacher introduces blogging activities within the language classroom, the opportunities for student interaction and the horizons of that “learning space” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 232) are expanded exponentially, providing student writers with a far greater audience both within and outside the classroom. Murray (2007), notes that a key feature of a “blog community” is the fact that all community members have easy access to each-others’ blogs. This can be accomplished with ‘moodle’, a class wiki page, or the blog community’s homepage (which might also be called a ‘blog magazine’).

According to Darabi (2006), “The core principles of learning communities focus on integration of curriculum, active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility...” (p. 53). Blogging activities realize these principles. To illustrate, Pinkman (2005) writes that blogging becomes communicative and interactive when participants assume multiple roles in the writing process, as writers who write and post, as readers/reviewers who respond to other writers’ posts, and as writer-readers who, returning to their own posts, react to criticism of their own posts. Dieu (2004) reaffirms this by stating that blogging gives a learner the chance to “maximize focused exposure to language in new situations, peer collaboration, and contact with experts” (p. 26). Within the scope of classroom-based blog activities, assignments can require the student blogger to communicate closely with a particular group of student bloggers. Moreover, the exchange can be almost instantaneous (during class time) or at the leisure of the student bloggers. This combination of planned and spontaneous communicative exchanges inside and out of the classroom makes blogging a meaningful and engaging social exercise. It is within this context that Williams and Jacobs (2004) contend that blogging has “the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning” (p. 247).

The key elements of blogging

As mentioned earlier, the cycle of blogging activities that was implemented included students setting up blogs, collaborating with blogging buddies (some within an appointed group of classmates called “blogging groups,” but others not), making blog posts, then reading classmates’ post and commenting. The ease with which a student or any other blogger can set up a blog has been discussed in the section above. This section addresses blog posts, peer reviews and peer comments on blogs posts, blogging groups, and the blogging buddy method. It also includes a summary of the common aspects of blogging that were covered in our various sources.





Most blogs are now hosted by blog providers such as *wordpress.com* or *blogger.com* and provide templates which do not require any technical, aesthetic or planning skills from the blogger. It is this ease of use which sets many of the current blogs apart from websites. Blogs also tend to have features which are not available on most regular web pages, such as the comments feature, which allows the reader to write onto the blog either directly or following approval from the author; e-mail/SMS publishing, which allows the blogger or a group of bloggers to post to the weblog directly using email or mobile phone messaging; and a subscription feature, which enables the blogger to automatically receive updates of his/her favourite weblogs whenever these are updated. Blogs provide a multi-genre, multimedia writing space that can engage visually minded students and draw them into a different interaction with print text. Students at all levels learn to write by writing.

Role of Blogs (V-blogs and class blogs) for language enhancement

Blogs are the perfect way for students to develop their writing skills. Earlier students wrote written responses to literature in journals. Now with the help of blogs students can comment online on literary journals and also on other student's blogs. The teacher can also involve in blogging by adding his/her comments. Any student or learner of English can jump into the blogging bandwagon and can explore and add new dimensions to the instruction by the teacher. Blogging has thus revolutionized the whole world of communication where information moves online at warp speed. Learners can be encouraged to create **poetry blogs**, **fiction blogs**, etc. and take it as far as their imagination could go. Learners can be encouraged to create poetry blogs, fiction blogs, etc. and take it as far as their imagination could go.

Video based material: The efforts required producing a video or a computer assisted learning package is greater than that of other audio-visuials. These videos have been recorded in real classroom settings as model lessons. The software used for material production includes Pinnacle Studio Version 9, 10, &11, Cool Edit &Wavosaur (Wavosaur is a free audio editor with VST support and many features for editing).

Using V-Blogs for Video-Based material: A video Blog is also known as a V-Blog, it is a blog essentially with videos that provide commentary on a particular subject, often serving as a personal online diary. In the present context v-blogs are used for educational purposes to disseminate the developed material for further improvement, innovations and research.





Steps for Uploading video on blog: Uploading video on V-blog is a simple and self-explanatory process. Follow the steps: 1. Add video 2. Browse video file 3. video title 4. upload video 5. Preview and edit post 6. Publish. Nowadays, blogs can also display photos and some people are using them with audio and even video, but this article will concentrate on the basics, showing how a simple text-based blog can be used to great Effect with your English language learners.

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://beeonline.blogspot.com/>) and 'Bee Online 2' (<http://beeonline2.blogspot.com/>).

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.

Using BALL to Develop Writing Skills: blogging buddy system

A study carried out to investigate students' interest and perception on the use of BALL (Blog Assisted Language Learning) as an additional component in writing skills development. You can create your blog to be whatever you want it to be. Essentially blogging makes anyone a columnist. The blogger can quickly set up his/her own blog on one of these free web spaces,





upload pictures, music and even video (from his/her own files or another web source) and then upload personal writing (known as a blog “post”) and receive commentary from readers regarding each post that has been made. With a blog set up and a list of classmates’ blog addresses, the student blogger can post his/her own writing from any internet-connected computer and also access, read and comment on any classmate’s post. Such activities can be done at a student’s leisure, in a campus computer lab, a classroom. Finally, for our curricular purposes, which were focused mainly on having students become engaged in the writing process within a broader, student-centered writing community, blogging stood out—in contrast to email, *MySpace* and *Facebook* messaging and online chat activities—as the BALL activity having the greatest pedagogical potential.

Blogging buddy

One way to address the issue of blog writing quality is with the blogging buddy system. The term blogging buddy refers to a student writer’s editing partner, the person who checks and comments on his/her blog post before it is posted. The blogging buddy is the initial peer reviewer, the first or final-draft reader, the one who acts as both the writer’s good conscience (useful for motivational purposes) and as his/her proof-reader (in that way, also a surrogate teacher). Regarding the blogging buddy’s role, there is no limit on how much or how little editing input or other commentary he/she provides for his/her partner (although this dictum can be adjusted according to class circumstances) as long as there is a concerted effort at review and response. In this way, the blogging buddy system is simple. It requires each student to present a piece of writing to his/her blogging buddy before it is posted.

Principles in support of blogging activities

1. First, it was evident from our own experience and from an understanding of the prior research on blogs that blogging’s popularity was growing rapidly, parallel to that of the Internet, and its potential in language teaching and learning was encouraging, though not fully known.
2. It is clear that many language learners in universities in the early 21st century are computer-proficient and enjoy working with computers. More recently, it has become evident that large numbers also maintain blogs in their first languages.
3. Research also suggests that educators help motivate students by using materials and implementing activities that students consider meaningful. As one of Pinkman’s students wrote, “...once or twice a week I check my blog and then other students write comments for me, my motivation is up, usually teacher check my blog, so if I read teacher comments my teacher thought about me, my motivation up” (Pinkman, 2005, p. 20).





4. Due to the popularity of computer and Internet technology and the growing interest in blogging, it was expected that our group of learners would also find the use of blogs in their English language study highly motivating.
5. Within our small college space steadily expanding student body, almost every student seemed to own his/her own computer and where we taught had an internet connection. This availability of the required technology, we believed, would make any plans for course-based blogging practical within our educational context.
6. We recognized that in blogging, students do exactly that as they create written posts in the target language that are shared and can be commented upon with regard to various aspects, whether content, organization and/or usage, by classmates, the teacher and anyone else with the blog address.

Summary of common aspects of the blogging activities

The common aspects of the blogging activities in the BA first year class were as follows:

- (1) Every student in each class set up a blog,
- (2) Every student's blog address was distributed to all other students in the classes at each respective level via the teacher's blog site, a class wiki or a class *moodle* page,
- (3) Every student worked at least half the semester with a blogging buddy, a classmate/peer reviewer who would read the student's blog post before it was posted,
- (4) Every student made at least one post on a specified theme to his or her blog every two weeks,
- (5) Every student was also required to read and respond to at least three posts made by classmates during each biweekly cycle. At the end of each semester, a survey was distributed to all participating students in order to gather data on student views toward the blogging experience. The four main topic areas of the survey were student attitudes toward writing, blogging as a classroom activity, doing peer reviews and being paired with blogging buddies. The purpose of the research was to gauge student interest in blogging and associated activities. After two semesters, that data was analysed. In this way, blogging would seem to satisfy Chapelle's first and third principles for "language learning potential" and "meaning focus" (Chapelle, 2002, pp. 499- 500). At the same time, blogging can be implemented in relation to other activities, ensuring integration of skills as well as fulfillment of Chapelle's second and fourth principles, those of "learner fit" and "authenticity" (p. 500).

Potential pitfalls of BALL blogging

Unwanted comments: To avoid unwanted comments, you can always restrict comments to people in the class or to registered bloggers.





Correction: It is difficult to use a blog for correcting students. Student written work can always be corrected before posting to the blog, or you can do class correction sessions using work published in the blogs.

Privacy: By their very nature, most blogs are public. Anyone with access to the Web can find and read a blog, and write comments (if this feature has been turned on). If privacy is an issue, then you will be better off using a blogging tool that allows different levels of access rights. Live Journal <http://www.livejournal.com> is a good choice, and is particularly popular with teenagers. Live Journal allows the setting up of a closed community, which could be restricted to the members of a class or to a wider circle including other classes, parents, etc.

Conclusion

Thus, the use of blogs has become popular in education institutions including public schools and colleges. Blogs can be useful tools for sharing information and tips among co-workers, providing information for students, or keeping in contact with parents. Blogs as interactive homepages or diaries are easy to handle and that enable students to engage in online exchanges, thereby expanding their language study and learning community beyond the physical classroom. Regular blogging also encourages more autonomous learning. When a student's audience includes his or her classmates, the teacher and potentially anyone with an internet connection, motivation to engage in meaningful written communication appears to increase. At the same time, when a teacher utilizing blogs implements a blogging buddy system, which assigns each student a peer review partner to help with editing before a piece of writing (the blog post) is uploaded, the result can be an effective means of facilitating greater learner interaction and reflection on skills development. Findings from an attitudinal survey conducted over two batches of post-matric students of 25 students demonstrate that they had extremely positive attitudes toward both blogging and the blogging buddy system.

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