

Learning via Blogging: The ESL/EFL Perspective

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Abstract— The use of technology in language learning is not an unfamiliar concept. ‘Weblogs’ or ‘Blogs’ are a type of technological category that allows writing personal journals online that can be published and viewed over the web. Even though blogs are being used for personal, educational, journalistic and commercial purposes worldwide nowadays, it is not a common practice for the non-native English users. This paper shows how blogs can be an effective tool for “English as a Foreign Language”/ “English as a Second Language” (EFL/ESL) users of non-native English speakers in order to improve their English skills. It also explains how blogging not only can help in improving the basic language skills of the blog users, but also in developing their other skills like communicative and critical thinking abilities.

Keywords- *blog; internet; ESL/EFL; education, learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of technology in language teaching and learning has been in practice for many years now. The use of language workrooms, overhead projectors, tape recorders, microphones and videos dates from the 60’s and 70’s. Undoubtedly, in recent times the use of ICT has become increasingly important in our classrooms as part of the English Language Teaching (ELT) practice, as well as in the learners’ and our own lives. Internet has eased the life of people in very many ways and has created an essential connection between people, merging the boundaries of the world. Apart from this widespread use of the Internet, the number of hours people spend online and their ability of multi-tasking is remarkable. There are manifold reasons why the Internet plays an important role in our daily routines, and why ICT has gained importance in the practice of ELT. Some of these reasons have been discussed by Dudeney and Hockly (2007). First of all, it is a fact that Internet access and broadband are becoming cheaper and more widely available by means of cable, satellite or wireless connections at home, work, and educational institutions or at cyber cafes. Secondly, we live in the cyber age and many young learners are born and growing up with technology as a natural and integrated part of their lives. Thirdly, as an international language, English is being used in contexts mediated by technology, especially the Internet. Many textbooks and teacher resources come with additional materials that

encourage the use of technology in the classroom either by incorporating interactive videos or tape recorders or by providing links to various websites where students can reinforce their L2 skills even outside the classroom. All these ideas have come up from the fact that by providing learners with opportunities to learn in ways that satisfy their needs, they will eventually become more engaged in the learning process and in realizing their potential (Bedenbaugh, 2006).

II. BLOGS IN EDUCATION

Since 2000, a surprisingly wide variety of blog uses can be observed in the higher educational and research sectors. Many foreign educators have started applying this technology to classroom instruction and language learning (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Richardson, 2004). In the field of higher education, where online asynchronous communication has taken place, either through email or discussion boards, blogs have been used in a number of different contexts, which have both extended and sometimes even replaced existing online communication tools. This indicates the usefulness of blogs as communication tools for specific disciplines, such as language learning, communication studies, higher education in general and teachers’ professional development as well.

A. What is a Blog?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the noun ‘blog’ means “A frequently updated website consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary.” McIntosh (2005) expands this definition:

Historically, a weblog, or ‘blog’ for short, is recognized by its regularly updated, time and date stamped posts, running down the computer screen in chronologically reverse order (i.e. the most recent post comes first). Crucially, there is an ‘Add Comment’ feature so that readers of posts can leave their opinions, questions or thoughts. Finally, there is a writing style element: blogs

are written by one individual who gives his or her thoughts in a generally relaxed, 'spoken' style. (p. 2)

As per the Internet vocabulary a 'Blog' usually means an online journal, personal or professional, that is frequently updated and which is intended for general public consumption. The essential characteristics of the blog are its journal form, typically a new entry at regular intervals, and its informal style. Blogs also often include different kinds of media like photo, audio, and video. Because of the relative quickness and ease of publishing the task of blogging requires, the number of users has grown rapidly since then, and we can now observe blogs being used for personal, educational, journalistic as well as commercial purposes.

Blog is like an online journal. The subject matter of a blog might be of anything from personal thoughts, opinions or general information about any topic. Publishing in the blog is comparatively easier than publishing something in newspaper or book. Firstly, doing the former is more economical and convenient. People do not need to go through the rigorous process of reviewing and selection or pay anything to publish something on their blogs.

Additionally, while *Facebook* and *Twitter* are great social networks to connect and share thoughts with the world, they are less appropriate for writing purpose than blogs because blogs are tailor made for writing and publishing. To use these social sites one needs to have an account and often put additional efforts to connect with people. There are a lot of rules and regulations to follow and not everyone is comfortable with the way these sites function. Also, while *Instagram* or *Snapchat* are widely used to share personal or general photos along with personal comments, these are not primarily meant for sharing long posts expressing thoughts and opinions of the users. Among all these, blog is seemingly the only tool that includes almost all the features for those who enjoy writing.

B. Characteristics of a Blog

A blog is basically like any regular website. However, it features several specific traits that in combination create the uniqueness. Blogs do not require any sophisticated software or in-depth knowledge of computer programming. Everyone with the basic knowledge of the Internet browsing can participate with a variety of different easy-to-use mostly free blog accounts available in the Internet. Blogs offer several security options, such as limiting access for reading and posting. The blogger has total control of who is authorized to view sensitive or confidential information since he has the access to the blog's security settings only. Many blogs are written by a single author, and visitors cannot make posts or edit the posts, but they can also add comments to an existing post. On the other hand, some blogs are community blogs where all members of the community can participate in discussions. One of the best things about blogging is it disregards the status of users—all users are equal. Users often use screen-names/ usernames rather than their actual names. Sometimes anonymous posting is allowed too.

Generally, blog entries are written like a letter, addressing an audience, which is written in an informal style and mostly in a first person narrative. It often tends to reflect the author's perspectives on various issues. Comments on the posts by the visitors can act as a form of discussion. Blog entries can consist of text and different kinds of media such as videos, audios, images as well as hyperlinks. Through hyperlinks, readers can be redirected easily to other resources. Hyperlinks are often used as supporting information for any claim. All blogs have an auto-archiving feature as well. All the published posts are archived in a reversed chronological order. Archives can be searched by titles, labels, tags, keywords or even by dates. Reverse chronological order of posts allows readers to identify the most recent posts published since the last time they read the blog. Blog content can be distributed via email subscriptions. A person can subscribe to many blogs and have the content aggregated in one place. RSS aggregators usually gather entries from multiple blogs and send them to the reader instead of the reader going to each individual blog. RSS allow readers to sort through more blog entries in less time.

C. Why Using Blogs as Learning Tools

There are numerous reasons for using blogs in education, such as to provide a real audience for students' writing, to provide extra reading practice for students, to encourage learners to participate. The novelty factor of blogging creates learner interest in starting to use blogs. It is usually claimed that blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. If learners are not encouraged, blogs can quickly be aborted. Blogs are well suited to serve as online journals for bloggers, particularly since they normally enable uploading and linking with various types of files. Blogs are often linked and cross-linked to create larger online communities. Language learners can open a personal blog and use it as their electronic portfolio that shows development over time. Language learners could also use a personal blog that is linked to a course and that reflects the course development over time. By publishing the blog on the Internet, the learner has the possibility of writing for readers beyond his cultural and geographical borders. Readers reading the blog in turn can comment on what they have read. This kind of self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of the learners, who may be more thoughtful (in terms of content and structure) once they become aware that they are writing for a real audience. This eventually creates a sense of personal responsibility in them.

Based on the possibilities proposed for classroom application, one might expect blogs to offer many reading and writing incentives for English learning and writing because blogging places emphasis on content, the possibility of an effective feedback and the freedom of working with both words and images and the ability to use follow-back links to relate one post to another. Scholars who are well aware of the blogging system also say that because students know they are going to have an audience by publishing their writing on the Web, they often produce higher quality work than students who write only for the teacher or for others in the class.

Grewling (2004) believes that the biggest reason for using blogs in language teaching is the way they are usually set up. Blogs invite participation and have the potential to democratize a classroom since the learners are given the chance of equal participation. He also brings up the fact that factors like timidity become less relevant in a blog than in a real-life situation. Furthermore, the active participation of the quieter students is increased in the online environments. Blogs can be accessed practically anytime, if it is not a private one, and anywhere so contributors can post and comment at their own convenience and determine their own pace and level of contribution (Grewling, 2004). Grewling and Pinkman (2005) opines that blogs give learners more control over their own learning and when created by students themselves, blogs can also give students the feeling of ownership of a personal space, a sense of belonging that is not so easily achieved in any face-to-face environment. In addition, Parashar Panday (2007) assures that blogs offer many benefits to the students since they help to enhance the skills of communicating, sharing, analyzing, reflecting, reading, writing, keeping records as well as promoting collaboration among people and peers. Hence, blogging is a process of:

- Reading/Listening to thoughts, views, experiences
- Reflecting on thoughts, views, experiences
 - Analyzing
 - Questioning
 - Critiquing
 - Reacting
 - Agreeing/Disagreeing
- Writing/Recording your reflection
- Sharing your reflection

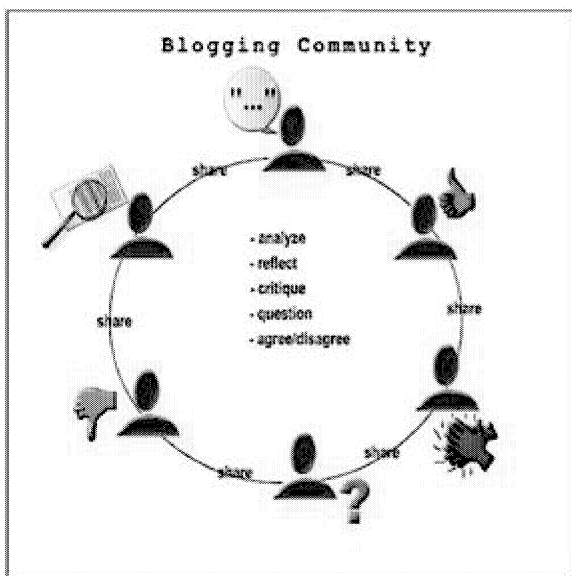


Figure: The Blogging Community (Peshwar & Pandey 2007)

The application of blog as a learning tool has created a new means for an online constructive learning as blogs provide more opportunities for learners to construct their own learning actively. Therefore, blog as a tool for language learning can provide learners a constructive and conducive language learning environment.

III. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BLOGS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

Blogging provides opportunities for developing one's English language skills in many ways. It facilitates the students' critical thinking skills. The students, as bloggers, engage in collaborative learning through their interactions with others on a blog which serves as a catalyst for critical thinking. Blogs foster critical thinking by encouraging students to evaluate what they read and write. Most bloggers use the whole blogging environment for self-expression and self-empowerment as writing there makes them become more thoughtful and more critical in their writing (Blood, 2002). A study done in Malaysia by Nadzrah (2007 & 2009) indicated that learners use English language constructively when they are interacting online using blogs, such as doing discussions, giving opinion and writing.

Writing on blogs offers students a way to improve their writing skills and encounter new ideas through interaction with others who are reading the blog. The online writing gives these students an authentic and enjoyable learning environment. Blogs also allow students to easily link to resources that support their assertions, and thereby encourage critical thinking.

Apart from that, blogging provides examples for students to model and to learn from. Kim (2011) suggests that blogs can enhance students' communication contexts. Publishing reflective commentaries on the Internet is an effective way for students to share each other's opinions and thoughts. Not only will readership increase, when bloggers see each other's content, they can learn from one another, thereby motivating them to produce better content next time. Furthermore, the creation of online portfolios of them on the web amounts to a showcasing of their works over the development period of their learning. These are a display of the learner's growth and reflection on their learning. When a sizeable number of interested visitors give comments and input to a blog, a community of bloggers/ learners may be formed automatically. Blogging also has a positive effect on the students' quality of writing. Currently blogging is slowly making an impression as one of the effective ways to create an e-learning environment and many educators too seem to consider blog as an important writing tool since "it occupies a prominent role in pedagogical model that stresses the importance of [...] the process of students taking control of their own destiny" (Brown, 2004: 260). The quality of writing in blogs is usually manifested in several ways. Because of the presence of an active audience the bloggers tend to become more aware as they write with their audience in mind. The permanent nature of publishing online encourages students to pay more attention to the content and language on their blogs. The feedback that they receive from

various sources as well as the different types, critical and non-critical; also affects the quality of their writing. The learners also enhance the quality of their writing by adding visual representation to their blogs. This helps to attract the visitors and clarify concepts to the reader. Visual literacy, visual thinking and visual learning are concepts related to the purpose of constructing meaning. Adding visual associations to their blogs helps the students express their points of views.

Furthermore, blogging facilitates meaningful learning for learners. The learners can explore other blogs and links to learn more about other countries, cultures and the people who blog to them. In foreign language classes, the benefits of blogs include language gains and furthering cultural understanding. By participating as active readers of different blogs, learners can gain the insider's perspective on various cultural topics, thus leading to better understanding of other cultures and what shapes them.

Additionally, blogging gives students a purpose for writing. Blogs tend to increase students' interest and ownership in learning. Learners direct their own learning about various topics important to them, while receiving feedback from others. Learners take ownership in blogging activities by actively searching for specific information. The use of blogs gives them chances to participate in a community. They learn that posted content can be read by people other than the people they personally know. The whole world can provide encouragement or feedback on the posts.

Blogging also helps improving speaking ability in learners. Fairly limited number of studies on the effects of blogging on speaking skills focus on the fact that blogs are effective tools for developing conceptualization brainstorming, monitoring, articulation, evaluation, self-presentation and information exchange skills. Video blogging or 'vlogging' tends to have a positive effect on improving learners' fluency, accuracy, accent or language complexity. Such online oral diaries are a key component of learning the target language, as they allow for a more personal and nuanced use of the language in a safe environment (Thomas, 2009). Doing such videos the learners get the opportunity to practice their language skills anywhere and with little prior preparation, which keeps them involved in the process.

IV. STUDENTS AS BLOG USERS

Blogging promotes comfortable interaction for students. Most of the students prefer blogging interaction to real-life interaction as it creates a more at-home learning environment for them. Again, students tend to get motivated to publish their blogs, because they want to make an impact on the readers. Publishing makes them feel emotionally connected, satisfied, and eager to get more read-responses. For most of the students, publishing their work has been proven to be a motivational incentive to write by using blogging. It specially empowers them as they feel 'in

control' of their writings. Blogging increases the writing skills of the bloggers because they are exposed to different types of writing that influence their overall writing style. Blog is also a platform where learners can express themselves. Apart from motivation there is a boost in the self-confidence level of the students because of blogging.

The acceptance or rejection of feedback is based on the students' trust in the reader and confidence in their comments and suggestions, and they seem to have a very little amount of trust in their own classmates because they are nonnative speakers of English just as they are. However, blogging can provide the students with a broader peer-connection with whom they can interact. They develop more acceptance towards criticism which ultimately helps them to improve their skills.

Students can to develop language skills such as listening or reading, and facilitate collaboration and peer review (Jones & Nuhfer-Halten, 2009). They foster motivation (Lee, 2010), creativity, ownership, and a relaxed environment, exposing learners to the target language in a way that textbooks do not (Ducate and Lumicka, 2008). As they become better at blogging their writing fluency tends to get increased (Lee, 2010; Fellner & Apple, 2006) and they give more attention to form (Lee, 2010), develop their critical thinking skills, and also get opportunities for meaningful learning, and learn to diminish confidence issues regarding editing and revising (Jones, 2006).

This way students can perceive the blog as a beneficial activity for the benefit of their English progress, especially in the areas of reading, writing and vocabulary building. They can practice of reading outside the classroom. They can acquire, activate and develop knowledge about topics of various interests as they get an opportunity to continuously interact with fellow bloggers and blog readers. By co-operating and socializing with different people a sense of community is created and thus the students are able to gain useful insights on how blogs and other online resources work (videos, dictionaries, games, etc.). Students as bloggers get various opportunities of taking part in healthy competitions to see who is more capable of writing and sharing something interesting. Eventually blogs can help the students become more autonomous in their learning processes.

V. IMPLEMENTATION

Since a blog can be about anything and initially it can be overwhelming for the learners to manage one completely on their own, the teacher can start by setting up a blog for the class. The students will be added as contributing bloggers and the blog will be an outcome of the collaborative effort of an entire class. The entire class will not only be able to give comments, but also publish, edit, and delete the posts. They can be given the choice to write about anything from their course syllabus. To encourage the students, the teacher can count it as an assignment in the end of the course. This will motivate the students to actively participate in the blog too and get the most out of this

experience. In order to implement blogging as a teaching-learning tool and make the most of it three main steps can be taken:

A. Teacher-Training

B. Materials and Resources

C. Assessment/ Evaluation Standards

A. Teacher-Training

The general positive attitude towards using blogs for EFL/ESL learning may not be applicable for all the learners. To make it effective, language teachers should also be aware of the roles of blogging in interactions and communications in the target language. To make the learners aware of blogging tools and teach them how to blog effectively the teachers themselves must be aware of it first. They need support and training and this can be done by conducting teacher education programs. Proper training can teach them how to use blogging in their classrooms and tackle the technical difficulties. Various seminars and certificate programs can be developed for institutions to motivate the teachers to train themselves.

B. Materials and Resources

Another essential idea to keep in mind is the lack of necessary resources needed to make it all work. Bangladesh and many other Asian countries in general lack the materials required for integrating blogs in classroom teaching. Since Lee (2011) believes that well-designed tasks and accessibility to the Internet are the main elements necessary to maximize the use of blogs for learning and communications, the importance of materials cannot be ignored. Some institutions, like universities might have access to computer and internet, but most of the times even these are not sufficient to meet the needs of a huge number of learners. Given the economic condition of Bangladesh and other similar countries, no overnight solution is possible. Government and non-government authorities might need to step in and provide extra funding needed to obtain the kind of technological facilities required.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper demonstrates how blogging contributes in creating an environment in which the bloggers can participate and interact actively and are given an opportunity to practice EFL/ESL beyond the traditional classroom teaching-learning system. It has also been observed how blogs can help the learners to share what they have learned and this way help each other as they eventually become more capable of using the language. Teachers and educators should also work to provide the learners with an environment that motivates them to share, interact, think critically, analyze problems at hand and provide possible solutions to them.

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