



Incorporating Weblogs into ESL Writing Classes

การประยุกต์ใช้เว็บบล็อกเพื่อการสอนวิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สอง

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บทคัดย่อ

เว็บบล็อกหนึ่งในนวัตกรรมทางด้านการสื่อสารผ่านคอมพิวเตอร์ จัดเป็นเครื่องมือที่มีประโยชน์ช่วยในการเรียนภาษาโดยเฉพาะทางด้านทักษะการเขียน งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่ออธิบายวิธีการใช้เว็บบล็อกเพื่อการสอนเขียนให้แก่นักศึกษาที่มีความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษในระดับกลางต่ำถึงระดับกลางและรายงานผลการสำรวจประสบการณ์และทัศนคติในการใช้เว็บบล็อกในโครงการที่เน้นทักษะการเขียน ผลการวิจัย พบว่า นักศึกษาส่วนใหญ่ยอมรับว่าการใช้เว็บบล็อกในการเรียนมีประโยชน์ต่อการพัฒนาทักษะทางด้านภาษาอังกฤษ การใช้เทคโนโลยี และการสร้างเครือข่ายในกลุ่มผู้เรียน

คำสำคัญ: เว็บบล็อก การเขียนเป็นภาษาที่สอง นวัตกรรมด้านการสื่อสารผ่านคอมพิวเตอร์

Abstract

A weblog, one of the recent asynchronous computer-mediated innovations, has been cited as a potentially valuable tool to facilitate language learning, particularly in the area of writing skills. This study aimed to demonstrate how a blog project was incorporated in low-intermediate to intermediate writing classes and to report on the students' experience and attitudes towards the use of weblogs during the project. The findings revealed that most of the participants perceived blogging as beneficial to the development of their English language and technology skills, as well as networking.

Keywords: Weblogs, ESL Writing, Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Innovations

Weblogs in English Language Teaching

Since its emergence in 1998 (Blood, 2000), the weblog (hereafter blog) has been popularly used by the cyberspace community and later been applied as a teaching and learning tool in second and foreign language classrooms. Because blogs are easily published, stored, organized, and edited, some researchers (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Ward, 2004: 13) viewed them as a valuable tool for teaching second and foreign language reading and writing. Campbell (2003) described three types of blogs: the tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog, all of which can be used in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. First, the tutor blog, created and managed by a teacher, can provide learners with reading practice, promote exploration of English websites, encourage online verbal

exchange using comment features, provide class or syllabus information, and serve as a resource of links for self-study. Second, the learner blog, created by an individual student or a group of students, is recommended for reading and writing classes. This type of blog can be used for written journals, practicing writing, developing sense of ownership, and gaining on-line publishing experience. Last, the class blog, a collaborative effort of an entire class, is suggested to be used for classroom discussion, project-based language learning, and reading and writing assignments. In brief, Campbell has suggested some practical ideas of how blogs can be used to teach ESL and EFL students.

Focusing specifically on ESL writing, Ward (2004: 3-4) pointed out that blogs can provide the needs for the effective teaching of writing, such as a genuine audience,

authentic communication, use of process writing, and peer review. He conducted a blog survey and discovered that two thirds of his 40 ESL university students of high-intermediate to advanced level preferred writing blogs to a more traditional written journal, and 37 of them believed that blogging helped improve their English. Despite their positive attitude towards blogs, only eight students reported that they would definitely continue using blogs whereas six said no, and the rest were unsure of their future use of blogs. Based on the positive results, Ward (2004: 13) stated that “As language teachers..., we cannot afford to ignore blogging, or neglect the opportunities that this new medium offers.”

A similar survey study was conducted by Wu (2005: 426-432) with two EFL writing classes of 51 Taiwanese students. Class A consisted of 35 engineering-related freshmen and Class B comprised 16 English majors. The former group met two hours a day twice per week while the latter group met once for two hours every week. The group of engineering freshmen was encouraged to use blogs, but no grade was assigned for their participation; on the other hand, the English-major group was required to use blogs, and it was weighted 20% towards their final grades. Thirty-two participants reported that it was relatively easy to set up their own blogs with Blogger,

but 33 of them had no knowledge of uploading images on their blogs. Although 17 students confessed that they posted fewer than three postings on their blogs, 41 of them believed that blogging was a good idea and more than half favored the idea of incorporating blogs in an English writing class. Furthermore, 36 students showed an interest in collaborating with students from another country in their future writing classes. The correlations between the students' disciplines (engineering versus English) or allocation into different classes and the quantity of their posts and perception of blog usage were not the focus on Wu's study. These findings suggest a need for a better understanding of how blogs can be used to support students' English language development.

Purpose of the Study

The current study was designed to 1) demonstrate how to integrate a blog project into an ESL writing class and 2) investigate students' attitude towards blogging.

Context of the Study and Participants

The study took place in an English Language Institute (ELI) at a large southeastern public university. The ELI prepares ESL students for academic study

in a U.S. university. Students are placed into five class levels, from beginning to advanced, based on their placement test scores. Each level studies five different English classes focusing on listening, speaking, grammar, culture, reading, and writing. Although these classes have different foci, they are coordinated across content areas and levels within a communicative curriculum. Students spend an average of 25 hours a week in class, including two 50-minute sessions in a networked computer lab. They can also access the computer lab after class.

The current investigation was carried out in a low-intermediate course which was focused on reading and writing skills. Blogs were used largely to support students' writing in the networked computer lab. At this level, students primarily worked on a well-structured paragraph together with free writing with the purpose of improving their writing fluency. The class met for 50 minutes five times a week, four of which were conducted in a regular classroom and one in the computer lab.

The participants of the present study were 37 low-intermediate international students from four groups. More than half of them were male (65%). Their ages ranged from 15 to 35 years old with the majority (38%) being 21-25 years of age. Their first

languages included Arabic, Spanish, Korean, Gujarati, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, French, Russian, and Portuguese. The majority of the participants (46%) had obtained a high school diploma, 38 % had an undergraduate degree, and 16% held a graduate degree.

Blog Project

After investigating a few free blogging services (e.g. Free Blogs for Teachers <http://edublogs.org>, Free Blogs for ESL/EFL Students <http://eslblogs.org>, and Blogger <http://www.blogger.com>), we selected Blogger to be used in our study because of several reasons. First, we are quite familiar with blog creation and maintenance with Blogger, and found it to be user-friendly. No knowledge of HTML is required of blog users. Second, no installation is needed when using Blogger because it provides a hosting service, allowing blog authors to store their blogs on its server. In addition, Blogger allows the users to create individual and group blogs. And last, it is easy for bloggers to navigate, organize, and archive their postings.

Each of our lesson plans in the blog project consisted of two major aspects: blog related skills and writing assignments. A typical lesson included an instruction of tasks/assignments, followed by a 10-20 minute presentation related to the blog

skills, and ended with writing and posting on blogs. To ensure students' understanding of tasks/assignments and to lessen their technology and writing anxiety, teachers walked them through both tasks and provided help when needed.

Blog Related Skills

The instruction of blog related skills was incorporated into the lesson plans because we anticipated that the technical difficulty of creating and maintaining blogs might pose some challenges for many students. This aspect of the lesson involved much technological consideration, requiring teachers to experiment more and also more extensive preparation. Completing all of the assignments in advance allowed teachers to experience and/or anticipate some difficulties; hence allowing for sequencing of learning tasks and troubleshooting of potential problems in preparation for delivery of the real lessons. We considered the first three sessions to be the most crucial, since these targeted skills laid the foundation of blog literacy.

Before introducing blogs, teachers created a class blog (see Appendix A) using Blogger.com. During the first blog session, which was probably the most challenging task to students, the teachers discussed the concept of blogs and instructed them to

create their individual blogs. The class blog (<http://elistrategies.blogspot.com/>) was first shown to students so that they understood what a blog was. Next, students were stepped through the process of blog creation, which took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete 3 easy steps: create an account, name the blog, and choose a template. When students finished these steps, they were asked to write down their user name, password, and the blog URL for their own references. Then, they wrote and posted a greeting and introduction on their own newly created blogs. Most of the students' blogs can be viewed on the class blog at (<http://elistrategies.blogspot.com/>) and clicking on the links to individual students' blogs located on the right hand side of the page.

How to format posts and upload images to blogs was presented during the second session where students were introduced to the basic principles of color contrast and webpage readability. They could select new templates and modify the look and feel (e.g. background color, font style, and size) of their blogs. For uploading images, teachers walked them through once and paired students with more advanced computer/Internet skills with less-skilled students. As planned, we often witnessed collaborative learning during this activity. A

concern, though, at this stage was that students might put more attention into searching and uploading images than the writing itself. Consequently, we encouraged the students to upload no more than three images per each posting.

The third blog session was for managing comments and dealing with issues related to Netiquette and online privacy. Students learned how to leave comments on each other's blogs and how to manage comments received on their blogs. Netiquette and online privacy issues were part of the lesson plans, aiming to educate the students to be polite and stay safe in the cyberspace community. Students were discouraged from displaying personal information, such as phone numbers and mailing addresses.

Writing Assignments

Writing topics were mainly chosen from textbooks used in the Academic Preparation class. Another consideration for a topic selection was students' cultural and background knowledge. We intended to select writing topics that students could draw on from their cultural and background knowledge to share with their readers. Common topics included, but were not limited to, My Hero, My Favorite Place, International Festival (a cultural event hosted

by the English Language Institute), My Opinion about Stem Cell Research, etc. For each of these topics, students were to write a variety of well-structured paragraphs in the networked computer lab. Students also had an opportunity to select their own topic, read, and comment on their peers' blogs as well as reply to questions posed on their own blogs.

Data Collection and Analysis

An on-line blog survey (see Appendix B) was used to collect data from the participants. This instrument consisted of 17 items, 4 questions eliciting demographic information, 11 multiple-choice questions with three alternatives (Yes, Not sure, and No) asking about their experience and perception of blogs, and 2 open-ended items eliciting their attitude towards blogs. The data were collected in the computer lab during the last week of classes. Before conducting the survey, the two teacher-as-researchers went over each item of the survey to ensure that the participants understand all of the items.

For the multiple choice questions which provided "Yes", "Not sure", and "No" as the three alternatives, descriptive analyses such as frequency distribution were carried out. A bar graph was used to present the results and demonstrate the

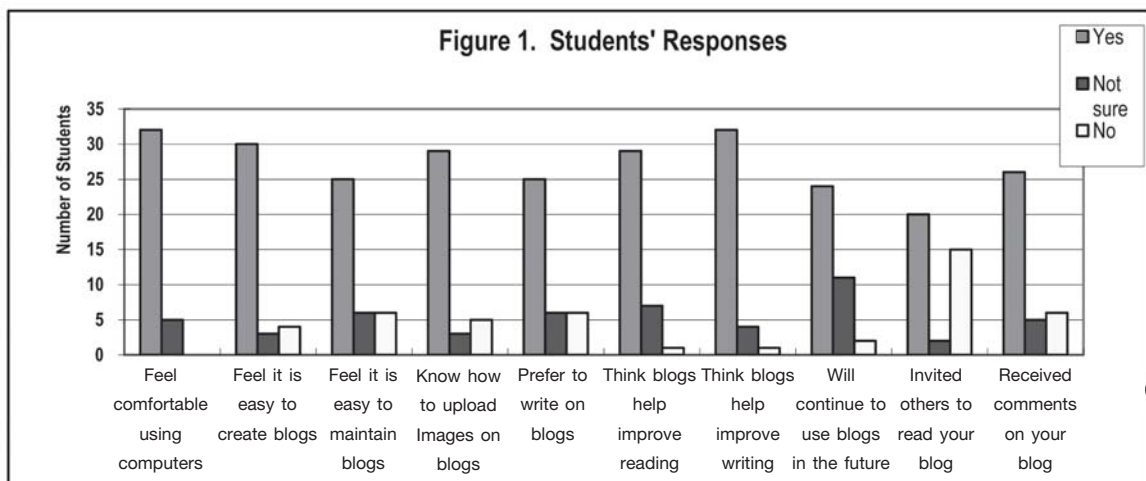
general trends of students' responses to these questions. For the open-ended questions, which elicited students' positive and negative attitudes towards the use of blogs, the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 101-115) was used to analyze the students' responses for emerging themes. Each of the two researchers independently analyzed the data using manual coding. This process involved four steps. First, the researchers read all of the raw data. Second, they unitized the data by looking for units of meaning (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 101-115). Next, unitized responses which appeared similar in content

were coded. Finally, the coded data were categorized and constantly compared among categories. Similar categories were grouped together while different emerging categories formed new themes. The categorization component of the analysis is empirical in that double coding (Miles and Huberman, 1984: 64) was used for categorization verification.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive statistics of students' responses to the multiple choice questions in the survey were presented in Figure 1.



A preliminary view of this graph revealed the prominence of the “Yes” responses to each question, which showed that the students generally held a positive view toward using computers and blogs. More specifically, these questions reflected

students' feedback to the blog project in the following three aspects.

Computer/Blog Skills

Among the 37 participants, 32 (86%) felt comfortable using computers. Thirty

(81%) indicated it was easy to create a blog, and 29 (78%) reported they knew how to upload images to blogs. These percentages are higher than those reported in Wu's (2005: 428) study, which may indicate that the design and instruction of blog-related skills in this study was successful. In addition, 25 participants felt it was easy to maintain the blog.

Attitudes towards Blogging

Twenty five (69%) participants preferred to write on blogs, which is similar to the result in Ward (2004: 11). Besides, 29 (78%) participants agreed that blogs could help improve reading, and 32 indicated the same as to writing. Furthermore, 24 (65%) implied they would continue using blogs in the future, while in Ward's study, there were only 20% of the participants chose the same answer to this question.

Online Communication via Blogs

Twenty six (70%) participants suggested that they received comments from others, and 20 (54%) indicated they invited others to read their blogs. These percentages are much higher than those reported in Wu's (2005: 428) study. This might be due to the fact that we instructed and encouraged students to leave comments on one another's blogs. However, there were still 15 (41%) participants who

did not invite others to read their blogs. This may suggest that quite a few participants did not take the initiative to share their English writing blogs with their friends, which echoes with the findings by Wu that quite a few students were reluctant to invite friends to read their blogs.

Qualitative Findings

Likes

The method of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 101-115) was used to analyze students' responses to the two open-ended questions in the survey. Six themes were emerged from students' responses revealing their positive attitudes about blogs. These themes included development of the English language skills, network/communication, motivation / interest, use of technology, collaborative learning/ audience, and ease of blog tasks. Development of the English language was represented by phrases/sentences such as "improve writing," "improve reading," "improve spelling," "The blog can help me understand English." Network/communication was characterized by the following phrases/sentences: "share with other people," "connection with other classmates," "It's nice because you meet new friends." "Everyone could contact each other and practice." Motivation/interest was denoted

by phrases/sentences such as “Have fun.” “It is entertaining.” “It’s an interesting class. I think no one felt bored.” “Interesting to use English for communicate through the computer with other people.” Collaborative Learning/Audience was signified by the following phrases/sentences, “I can do comments on everyone’s blogs.” “My friends can read my blog.” “I think it is a good idea to work with group in class.” “Let others see my blog.” Use of technology was signified by phrases/sentences such as “studying in the computer lab,” “I think most people like to use computer than sitting in the normal class.” “It’s a good class by using computer.” Ease was reported by phrases/sentences such as “easy to do” and “It is easy to work on blog.” Also, it is

worth mentioning that 11 more positive responses, in which students wrote either “everything” or “Everything is good” when asked what they enjoyed about blogs in this class, were too general to be categorized into any of the aforementioned themes.

Each unitized response under each theme was quantized or transformed to a numerical form (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998: 149-166) and given a score of 1. These quantized data were determined for frequency and percentages. Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of the six themes emerging from 37 units of meaning with respect to students’ positive attitudes towards the use of blogs in the ESL writing classrooms.

Table 1 Summary of Six Themes Emerged from Students’ Positive Attitude toward Blogs

| Theme | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Development of English language skills | 11 | 30% |
| Network/Communication | 6 | 16% |
| Collaborative Learning/Audience | 6 | 16% |
| Motivation/Interest | 6 | 16% |
| Use of Technology | 5 | 14% |
| Ease of blog tasks | 3 | 8% |

Each of the six themes seen in Table 1 will be discussed as follows.

Development of English language skills

The most frequent positive responses,

which were consistent with the quantitative findings, were that the use of blogs in this beginning writing class gave them an opportunity to practice using English. Being a text-based and computer-mediated tool,

blogs acted as a cognitive amplifier (Harnad, 1991: 39-53) that helped improve the students' spelling, reading, grammar, and more specifically, writing skills. As one student wrote "On blogs, you practice your grammar, your reading, and your writing." Another student summed it "It [blog] helps improve my English and writing skills." Our students' perception of blogs in this regard was in line with Ward's (2004: 1-16) findings that most of his first-year ESL university students (37 out of 40) believed that the blog can improve their English.

Network/Communication

A few of our student bloggers used this asynchronous tool for networking and/or communication. Based on the responses, six participants mentioned that blogs connected them with their classmates or friends. This information was similar to that of Ward's (2004: 1-16) students who reported using blogs to keep in touch with friends and family in addition to completing their class assignments.

Collaborative Learning/Audience

Warschauer (1997: 470-481) has predicted that synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated tools are a potentially useful tool for collaborative language learning in an online learning environment. Likewise, blogs were perceived

by many of our participants as a tool for collaborative learning and providing an authentic audience.

Motivation/Interest

Like network/communication and collaborative/audience, motivation/interest was cited 6 times with respect to what students liked about blogs. When considered carefully, these three themes are interconnected. When students made new friends and/or collaborated with their classmates, their motivation and interest tended to increase. Computer and Internet technology has been reported to heighten students' motivation to produce their written work. For example, Goldberg, Russell and Cook (2003: 12-17) reviewed 65 studies to determine the effect of computers on students' writing and found that students who used computers when learning to write were more engaged and motivated in their writing; as a result, they produced written work that was of greater length and higher quality.

Use of Technology

In today's digital world, electronic literacy is almost inseparable from language literacy. This view was shared by some of the students in this study who perceived the use of computers or studying in the computer lab was beneficial to their

language learning. When investigating students' e-mail exchanges, Waschauer (1997: 474-476) found that students cited the development of new technology skills among other reasons why they enjoyed using e-mail to communicate with others.

Ease of Blog Tasks

Although ease was mentioned by only three participants, we felt that this was also an important issue. Some studies (e.g. Pennington, 2003: 291-293) have cautioned teachers/educators of the technical difficulty and frustration the computer and technology might cause for students. This was one of the reasons why we incorporated the blog-related skills portion into every lesson in the computer lab. We felt that this instructional support helped troubleshoot some problems in creating and maintaining students' blogs.

Dislikes

The participants' responses regarding what they disliked about blogs were significantly lower than the blog features that they liked (14 versus 37). However, the data posed more challenges to categorize. The only theme emerging from these data was technical difficulty, which was represented by eight statements such as "Sometime I can't post on Blogger." "I need help from teacher because blog is new for me." "There are few options for designing

blogs." This may suggest that even though the majority of the students benefitted from the instruction on blog-related skills, there were still some students who felt unsure about the technology component in this blog project. The feeling of technological uncertainty may be a pertinacious problem, which teachers should be aware of. The rest of the students' responses about their dislikes, which we found quite revealing, are reported below:

- "You don't have control about comments in your blog."
- "It's not popular."
- "I don't like to introduce about me and other people can read."
- "I'm not sure yet. I don't have a long time to use blogs."
- "I don't like blogs because you learn nothing. It is best to write on Words and teacher makes correction."
- "Not enough time to write and post on blogs during class time."

Conclusion

This research study aimed to demonstrate how weblogs could be easily incorporated into an ESL writing classes. Besides being free of charge, a weblog is a user-friendly technology which does not require any programming knowledge for teachers or students. It also seems to

provide relevant learning opportunities related directly to writing.

With respect to students' attitudes towards blogging, the results suggest that this technology promotes positive attitude among the students when writing. Their optimistic outlooks, in turn, heighten their motivation in communicating and sharing information with others via this asynchronous tool. As a result, the students gain English-writing experience and technological literacy related specifically to blogging. These encouraging results can be interpreted that blogging is beneficial to the student's development of writing and technology skills.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have important implications for teachers who would like to implement weblogs to support students' writing skills. First, teachers should create a class blog as a meeting place for everyone and include links of individual students on it. Secondly, to prevent frustration that might arise from technological difficulty, teachers can instruct students to write down

their user names and passwords in a safe place for later use in case they forget this important information. In addition, teachers can assign students to work with a partner, so they can learn from and share with each other both the technology and language skills. It is also important to teach students some blog-related skills to lessen their anxiety.

Limitations

There are two major limitations in the present study. First, the sample size was small and drawn from one educational setting. Thus, the study might serve as a preliminary exploration for further studies. Second, the survey relied on students' self-report, suggesting a need in future research for a triangulation of other types of data sources, such as participant interviews, class observations, and/or teachers' teaching reflective journals. Despite these limitations, the present findings demonstrate that blogs have a positive impact on students' attitude and motivation to produce their written work.

Appendix A

The Class blog

ELI Academic Prep II

SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2007

Netiquette - 9 Golden Rules

Netiquette or network etiquette is basic rules of e-mail use. By following these rules, e-mail users can write clear and easy-to-understand e-mail messages as well as appear polite in cyberspace (the online world).

Netiquette—Do's

1. Keep your e-mails short. Separate different ideas into several paragraphs, so it will be easier for your readers to read your messages.
2. Check your message before you send it. Make sure it says what you want it to say. You can use "emoticons" (:-), :-), :-), :-D) to help



About Me

Shengrong
Hi, there. I'm a teacher at the English Language Institute at University of South Florida. This is a blog for an academic writing class for intermediate English language learners. Check out my students' blogs under "Links" on the right side of the main page. They are making wonderful progress!

[View my complete profile](#)

Links for Spring 2007 IIA Class

- [Abdulmohsin](#)
- [Ammar](#)
- [Bader](#)

Appendix B

Blog Survey

For the past five weeks, you have had some experience working with blogs and we would like to know your opinion about them. Please answer the following questions carefully. Your honest responses will help us improve how to use blogs in classrooms at the ELI. Thank you for your time and effort in completing this survey.

1. What is your gender?
 - A. male
 - B. Female
2. What is your age range?
 - A. 15-20 years old
 - B. 21-25 years old
 - C. more than 25 years
3. What is your highest educational degree?
 - A. high school diploma
 - B. undergraduate/bachelor's degree
 - C. graduate/ M.A. degree

4. Do you feel comfortable using computers?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Sometimes
5. How long have you used the Internet?
 - A. fewer than 3 years
 - B. 3-5 years
 - C. more than 5 years
6. Do you prefer to write on blogs or on paper?
 - A. On blogs.
 - B. On paper.
 - C. Not sure.
7. Do you think blogs can help improve your reading?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
8. Do you think blogs can help improve your writing?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
9. Do you feel it is easy to create your own blog with Blogger?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
10. Do you feel it is easy to maintain (for example, post, edit, and delete messages) your own blog with Blogger?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
11. Have you invited others (for example, your friends, your family) to read your blog?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
12. Have your friends, classmates, and family members posted comments on your blog?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
13. Do you know how to upload photos on your blog?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
14. Will you continue to use the blog in the future?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 - C. Not sure.
15. What are the things you like about blogs in this Strategies class?

16. What are the things you DON'T like about blogs in this Strategies class?

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