

USING BLOGS IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO PHILOLOGY STUDENTS

Olena Kovalchuk

Lutsk National Technical University, Lutsk, Ukraine
o.kovalchuk@lntu.edu.ua

Inessa Krasnokutska

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Chernivtsi, Ukraine
i.krasnokutska@chnu.edu.ua

This paper reports on an innovative approach to using blogs in teaching English as a foreign language. A blog is a sound example of information and communication technologies (ICT) implementation for language learning. In this paper, authors present the results of a small-scale action research aimed at analysing students' perceptions of blogging. In total, 25 first-year university students majoring in English took part in a survey. The research results give the evidence of the benefits of using blogs: it encourages students' autonomous learning, expands their collaboration through comments and discussions, improves language skills, increases the sense of responsibility and the desire for life-long learning, etc. At the same time, teachers consider blogs to be an effective facilitation for greater learner interaction and skills development. The research deals with the detailed blog starting guide for teachers of English. Authors instruct how to create and maintain blogs, as these interactive web pages prove to be effective for students online chatting, exchanging photos, videos, pictures, thereby expanding their language study beyond the classroom. For those who refuse being involved in the creation of a personal web page, some useful blog links are given. For better understanding of blogging efficiency, the researchers report on the positive implementation of blogs in teaching English, focusing on developing reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies; blogging; students; English skills; survey.

Introduction

Nowadays labour market has to respond to the challenges of new employee skills. In spite of professional efficiency, knowledge of foreign language, computer literacy, employee's independence in problem solving became an integral part of the professional competitiveness.

The ability to communicate in English is considered very important in the process of recruitment. Therefore, during classroom activities, teachers want to develop their students reading, writing and speaking skills. Moreover, many English language teachers are more concerned not only with classroom instruction but also with preparing students to be responsible for their learning outside the classroom. This approach makes students responsible for their own learning that will consequently result in the development of life-long learning skills, including high-level thinking skills: the ability to analyse information, synthesise knowledge and evaluate results.

Discussion of independent learning frequently arises in the context student-teacher relationships and the role of information and communications technologies (ICT) in teaching/learning. ICT offer broad training capabilities compared to classical teaching methods and tools, it means they can be one of the factors in improving the quality of teaching practice. They have the potential to change not only the educational environment and presenting knowledge but also the way of learning and teaching subjects. Unfortunately, all the attempts to use ICT in the traditional teaching process face the problem of teachers' lack of operational skills and their unpreparedness. This equally concerns the teacher of foreign languages.

The methodology of integration of ICT in teaching English is the issue of thorough attention of many Ukrainian and foreign scientists. Researchers discuss effective methods of ICT integration in teaching and learning (Kozlakova & Kovalyuk, 2009; Ferriter, 2009; Bilak, 2014; Hwang, n.d.); application of a wide range of multimedia technologies for the development of cognitive abilities of students in foreign language acquisition (Kostenko, 2013; Romaniuk, 2014; Kramarenko, 2010; Knapp & Hulbert, 2015); main areas of ICT use in studying humanities (Hrytsenchuk, 2010; Özyurt, 2015) and some aspects of ICT implementation in the classroom vs. individual learning process (Blin, 1999).

However, many research works deal with some contradictions in effective application of ICT in teaching. For example, on the one hand, the authors give the evidence of benefits of ICT in teaching students particularly in the form of encouraging motivation and better self-management skills (Blin, 1999). On the other hand, some authors emphasise the lack of control or correction in individual learning (Romaniuk, 2014; Kramarenko, 2010). It means that independent learning does not merely require students' self-directed work

and undoubtedly, a teacher is a leading actor who motivates and supports independent learning. Most researchers suggest theoretical approaches regarding teaching and learning with the use of ICT (Blin, 1999) but only a few of them give practical guidance for language instructors for implementing ICT facilities in teaching English.

One of the most popular modern IC Technology which can be excellently used in teaching and learning English is blogging. This technology does not change teaching or learning process but helps to introduce new methodology in the learning environment.

Therefore, we designed this small-scale case study with the **aim** to provide a detailed picture of practical implementation of blogging into English classroom activities. To realise the set goals, we are to fulfil the following objectives:

- to provide a theoretical justification for the implementation of blogging in English classroom activities;
- to describe blogging types and benefits;
- to present the results of a small-scale action research aimed at investigating students' abilities to practice English skills in blogging in and out university.

What is a blog?

The word blog was first introduced in 1999 in a form of hosting websites. Its essence lies in the publication of news reports displayed in a chronological order. A blog resembles an online journal. Originally, hosts use blogs to share their thoughts with the audience regarding certain issues. These sites often resemble a thematic encyclopaedia. Nowadays the blog concept received a broader sense. A blog (weblog) makes possible to store and classify information; easily update it and create Internet community to discuss topics, to make reviews and to provide online tests or surveys (Oxford Learners Dictionaries, 2017).

No doubt, that a blog today occupies first place among the websites that specialise in publishing new information. The main feature of blog running is posting information in a chronological order. Experts of different fields of industries have their own blogs to promote their activities. School teachers and university professors as well are not the exception. During regional and national teacher contests the finalists often present the jury their blogs to win the competition.

The attractiveness of blogs lies in its didactic efficiency such as accessibility (it requires only basic access to the Internet); in ease of use (a minimum of technical know-how), the effectiveness of the information space, interactivity and multimedia. A teacher or a student chooses interlocutors him/herself and administers the process of communication personally.

Types of blogs used in language teaching

Among the variety of classifications, blogs can be made according to different criteria (Churchill, 2009, p. 181):

- Authority rights (personal; social or group blog; corporate blog);
- Multimedia predominance (text blog; photoblog; music blog; podcast; video blog);
- Content distinctions (content blog; Twittering; blog monitoring; citation blog);
- The technical basis (stand-alone blog; blogging platform; Moblog).

For our research, we will consider the typology of blogs made by Aaron Campbell (Campbell, 2004, p. 65). This typology concerns the possibility of implementing blogs in a language classes.

When a Blog is run by the teacher of a class it is called *the Tutor (Teacher) blog*. Creation of a Teacher blog enables a teacher to popularise his/her activity among students and among colleagues. Such a weblog facilitates communication with teachers as well as teachers community and with parents of students. Because it can solve many of the issues normally take unduly long time and nerves.

Students can use blogs to record what they teach and the teachers that they teach. For example teachers can publish information on the blog from its course — specify that should make students, homework advice, provide links to useful online or write to the day it was passed in class. This application has many advantages: students can quickly make up for the missed assignment; the teacher can use a blog as a plan or course as a resource for distance learning; blog is an accurate synopsis of the course to which students may apply to future or new teachers; blogging is used to record class excursions and to create an electronic review of a student's life.

A shared space, where teacher and students are able to write discussing common subjects is called *the Class Blog*. It is used as a collaborative discussion platform where students share their reflections inside or outside classroom activities. It is also a space where students can discuss and solve common problems and collaborate the classroom projects.

The Learner Blog is the third type of blogs and it is regarded as space where students can write frequently about their interests, can post comments on other students' blogs. Learner's blog requires more

time and effort from the teacher to both set up and moderate it but it is probably the most rewarding.

No matter what type of blog is used in studying or teaching language, one should remember that by application of computers in language learning “blogging has involved student interaction with information systems” (Little, 1999, p. 210–212). It means that blogs play important communicative role in encouraging interaction between people.

Methods

The authors initiated a small-scale action research to study the level of comfort and satisfaction among university students in implementing a blog project into English classes. The authors also pursue the idea to provide students with a forum where they could practice their reading, writing and speaking English skills. Unfortunately, students were not able to practice their listening skills but at the blogging platform they could easily express themselves, reflect their view on what had been covered in class, share opinions, question one another, engage into discussion or recycle language in critical thinking.

It should be noted that action research used in this paper is focused on qualitative methods of collecting data than quantitative one. Therefore, suggested questionnaire involved open-ended questions predominantly in order to explore students’ behaviour in English classroom.

The action research was held at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Ukraine. In total, 25 first year students of Foreign Languages Department were involved in the survey. The results obtained have made it possible to detect the state of progress in application of blogs in English classroom activities as well as discover the level of students satisfaction in using them.

First, in an Informatics class students were shown a sample of *Tutor blog*. Students then were instructed on how to design their own *Learners blog* on *Blogger.com*, a popular free blogging platform. Having completed their personal *Learners blogs*, students made their trial blog entries. Then teacher posted *Learners blog* addresses on *Tutor’s blog* and instructed the students to train their reading and writing skills through blogging. So, students were to read two to three blogs of their group mates and comment on them. After common group work, students continued working with the blogging project but as an individual, out-of-class activity. During 7 weeks of university study students had the assignment of writing one entry of 100 words every week, and commenting on two or three blogs of their group mates. Students were to post and discuss topics based on the classroom activities. For example, if that week students learned the topic on how to describe the global problems so they were encouraged to recycle or reuse those skills on their blog.

At the end of semester, students had final discussions with the teacher concerning success and failures of the project results. Students also were given a questionnaire to discover their attitudes towards blog project and efficiency of assignments. Questions were organised in terms of revealing the advantages of doing a blog project, whether or not the students could improve their English skills, how would they continue blogging in the future, what they expected to achieve by using blogs in a language class, how they feel about other students’ comments on personal blog.

Results

The answers to suggested questionnaire showed that only four students, among 25 interviewed, experienced blogging prior to the class, and 21 learners had no any knowledge of blogs before. So, when students described their expectations from blogging most of them considered the project as interesting and funny thing which will be useful for their future career and with this they anticipated to improve their computer skills. The other students with prior knowledge of blogs hoped that blogs will help them “...to improve their English writing skills.”

When asked what they learnt from the project the responses included: “How to create blog or blogging journal”, “Useful things about computer programmes”, “Knowledge about the subject”, “Funny things” (see Table 1).

Table 1

Question: What did you learn from the project?	
Response	Number of Students
How to create blog/keep blogging journal	17
Useful things about computer programmes	2
Knowledge about the subject	3
Funny things	1
Other	2

Another block of questions concerned the comments on how difficult the project was and how much time/effort they put into the project daily to create it. One third of the students responded that they had to spend many efforts every day working on the project. Six students considered that creating personal blogging journal is not a long-term process, it took them only 1-2 hours a day, eight students spent between 3-4 hours/day, two of them spent 5 hours, and only one confessed that blogging project took him more than 5 hours a day.

All of the interviewed students responded almost unanimously that they liked the blog project. When asked about project advantages, students' responses vary. Twelve students admitted that they enjoyed interacting with others as it may lead to establish the rapport with teacher and group mates and get some knowledge from them. Nine students confessed that the project encouraged them to share individual vision and express personal thoughts. Five students responded that the project assisted them in learning new information and using new English vocabulary. Two students cited that they were sure to have improved their writing skills by participating in the project. Other two advantaged from blogging in learning innovative approach useful for future profession. See all responses regarding the advantages of the project in Table 2.

Table 2

Response	Number of Students
Interacting with others	12
Share individual vision	9
Learning and using new vocabulary	5
Improved writing skills	2
Innovative approach useful for future profession	2

Beside the advantages, students were interviewed about what they found as the disadvantages of the blog project. It is very inspiring that predominant half of students liked the project overall (it means that fourteen students have not revealed any disadvantages). Six students commented on that they found the project time-consuming and they wished they could have had class time to complete the assignment. One person responded that she found it difficult to post some messages onto the site or install picture software. Table 3 lists only disadvantages found by interviewed 25 students.

Table 3

Response	Number of Students
None	14
The assignment was too time-consuming	6
Too many settings to create a blog	2
Teacher gave too complicated assignments	2
Too difficult to post messages and install picture software	1

When students were asked how they felt about their group mates commenting on their blog, eighteen responded that they "enjoyed" the comments as they found these posts funny and interesting. Six students responded that they were happy with comments as it showed the rapport made them "happy" and only one person indicated that the comments were helpful. When asked about how they felt about their teacher commenting on their blogs, almost all students gave positive responses, saying that they "liked" reading teachers comments except two who worried a lot on being correct with their posts. Eight students from twenty-three satisfied reported that teachers' comments helped them to improve the mistakes in blog project, other eight considered comments as a helpful solution for personal blog perfection. Five students insisted that with the comments teacher encouraged them blogging. Two of the respondents were simply "happy to have teacher's comments" in a form of rapport. Students' answers are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4

Response	Number of Students
Helped them to improve the mistakes	8
Helped to develop personal blogs	8
Increased motivation to blogging	5
Happy to have the rapport	2
Worried	2

Among 25 students interviewed, only half were sure that they would continue blogging (on condition they have time). Four respondents were sure that they would not continue blogging. Two learners responded that they would continue blogging if they had time and in case when other bloggers continued to comment on their site.

Discussion

The results of the given survey are important both for teachers and for students. The answers showed clearly students' desire to improve their English skills (reading, writing and speaking). For instance, 96 % of students of our groups liked blogging project in general also 88% liked writing as blogging activity. About the same percentage 84% responded that they liked posting and commenting posts of their groupmates. However, it gives us the result: students who like to write will obviously like blogging and on the contrary, those who dislike writing do not except blogging.

The second assumption is that despite students liked writing or not they all enjoyed reading the posts of their groupmates as well as the comments on their own writing (96%). This supports the notion that blogging is an excellent tool for teachers to practice student-centered and peer-focused activities. At the same time, students did not feel abandoned in the blogging project. In fact, 100% enjoyed and appreciated teacher's comments on their blog posts. Such teachers input they consider vital for establishing teacher-student communication or so called "blog dialogue". Blogging discussion may be continued as an in-class activity where every blog participant can express personal comment or vision orally.

Finally, according to the survey results, we may conclude that actually students appreciate blogging project as an instrument to improve their writing, reading and speaking skills. While all expressed satisfaction with blogging project in general, 96% indicated that by participating in blogging project they all have a good learning experience.

At the same time, while the survey results showed students entire satisfaction of blogging activities teachers got perfect motivation tool for language learning.

Starting your own blog: a guide for teachers

Taking into account the research results, we would like to give a detailed guidance for English teachers, which enable them to create personal blogs.

Nowadays the most discussed issue of blog creation is the availability of the access at an affordable cost, quality. Regarding to the affordability and benefits that blogs can bring, two vivid modes of starting blogs may be considered: self-hosted blogs and free blogging platforms.

Self-hosted blogs

Self-hosted blogs are suitable for those who want to have maximum flexibility in submitting, changing and using resources. It is easy to integrate into the blog other media materials: photos, videos, documents or presentations. A self-hosted blog is the best way to launch, especially for IT professionals.

At the same time, a blog developer should meet a number of criteria: to have programming skills (a knowledge of PHP, MySQL, HTML, CSS, JavaScript); to be practically experienced in using hosting platforms; to know how to buy a domain name and link it with your hosting.

Thus, to create a self-hosted blog is a very cumbersome and time-consuming task. However, blog owners have to be good at programming, mainly at web programming, because it requires a great deal of free time and quite challenging for video blogging. Moreover, the entire development of a blog is a good individual task or training practice for students of Computer Science Department. It enables to provide and consolidate a comprehensive knowledge of Web technologies.

Free blogging platforms

Setting up a blog by using free blogging platforms can significantly reduce time. Initially, a blog maker creates an account, gets a domain (such as www.example.com), and sets up personal site. The best blogging platforms that enable teachers to create a blog for free are Blogger.com and WordPress.com. These services are user-friendly, free, and powerful. However, they have quite a few problems that limit overall blog control: blog owner does not ultimately control the blog's content; the web address of the blog will end up being long and hard to remember.

Technically, one can easily create and maintain blogs by using free blogging platforms. A teacher as well with no effort can create his/her own blog on one of the above free web platforms, by uploading pictures, music and even video and also upload personal writing ("posts") and receive comments from the blog readers reading each post.

Whilst, practically, starting blogging may only seem to be an easy thing to do but the most difficult task in this business is the content of a blog or as the saying states – Content is king! It means that without well-written and engaging content, a blog will fail to succeed. Following Jessica Knapp's idea, we can affirm, "blog design and marketing tactics are important, but they're practically useless if you don't have quality content. People may come because of the marketing, but they'll stay when you deliver content they need" (Knapp, 2017, p. 55).

In case if blog making is a tiresome or not successful process, a teacher can apply to Internet existing educational blogs. The Internet offers various English Teacher (Tutor), Class as well as Learner's blogs. After thorough scanning of the blogs and their content, we have selected the best three in every group.

1. Teachers' (Tutor) Blogs: englishteacherjonathan.co.uk; esleld.blogspot.com; huffenglish.com.

2. Class Blogs: <http://englishteachermargarita.blogspot.com>; <http://thedarininglishteacher.blogspot.com>; https://www.bellevue-newlands.school.nz/5990/learning_cave_sets/174-class-blog;

3. Learners' Blogs: myenglishteacher.eu/; blogenglishteachermelanie.com; englishwithjo.com/; mrswatersenglish.com

Blogging benefits

Blogs certainly are very popular in education process especially in teaching English as foreign language. Teachers use them with the aim to either support teaching or learning (or both). A long-time practice of blogs using in education gives evidence about their benefits.

Blogs help learners to interact, communicate and peer edit others' posts. Students should be encouraged to comment their groupmate's posts. By commenting their group mates or other people posts, students learn how to be contextually, lexically and grammatically correct. They realise that blogs have access worldwide and their mistakes or unawareness of easy things will be vivid to everyone.

Interacting with people from different countries and cultures may lead to establishing friendly relations with them that may help learners to make common projects; starting a new business with someone outside of your country. Moreover, blogging helps students see their work in different subjects as interconnected and organise their learning.

Blogging helps shy students to participate and communicate: quiet students in class become more confident when they express themselves in blogging. Moreover, blogs may be used as a valuable source of information about computer, software or mobile phone. Besides, one can develop personal skills in different spheres of knowledge, for instance, improve video and photography skills, get involved in the areas of web designing and programming languages like HTML, PHP, MySQL, etc.

Blogging is the most beneficial for those who are looking for additional or permanent source of income.

Any person can use blogging as a site for advertising goods, products, services. A blog acts as a platform for showcasing the products to sell and later an essential place to communicate with the consumers which helps to promote business.

Using blogs in your classroom: training assignments

This part of the article has the purpose to describe and analyse positive experience of blogging in University teaching English. By analysing some sources (Churchill, 2009; Wu, 2004; Ferriter, 2009, etc.), we have defined several ways of using blogs as a learning tool in teaching EFL. The authors' experience deals with positive reflections of how teachers can use blogs in their classrooms for training reading, speaking, writing or listening skills.

To practice reading through blogging, a teacher includes texts relevant to students' interests and to the objectives of the lesson. In their turn, students leave their comments in respond to the reading assignments. This may seem to advantage to teachers as after students' written and oral output, it is possible to get to know about students' interests. In order to give students an opportunity to read the article in full, a teacher places the link to it immediately after the chosen extract. Students can master reading skills by reading their peers' writings to underline/correct spelling and grammatical mistakes.

For training speaking skills and learning vocabulary, blogs serve as an excellent reference point for students who wish to go through the material discussed in class once again. The slideshows, recordings, polls or even eBooks, used or created during the lesson, may be used by students as a source of familiarising vocabulary for accomplishing home tasks. Having read the article, listened to the record, watched videos, or revised slideshow, students become ready to discuss classroom assignments. A teacher can check the knowledge by testing students. For example, students review the websites of the previously listed newsgroups and then answer the questions on the worksheets to check the comprehension and discuss the results.

According to Professor Wen-Shuenn Wu from Chung Hua University in Taiwan, by using blogging in the classroom a teacher can easily train writing skills. The advantages for writing in an English class are the following (Wu, 2004): it is very easy to design and maintain; teachers can access and create assignment and review materials in a chronological order; most students write more carefully if they know that the article are published online for authentic readers who may comment on their posts.

When training listening skills through blogs, a teacher has to work out with some English language exercises to keep students interested in the classroom. An English teacher can get on a free website (such as Voice Thread) which may be used for setting listening assignments. Students are assigned to listen to several of their classmates and give each other personified comments. By listening to each other and giving encouraging comments, a teacher builds a positive classroom environment.

One more activity to practice listening skills is using songs, watching TV shows, or even listening to podcasts. While listening to a song or watching TV shows, students can get an additional task such as to suggest the words to listen and keep them track of how often they hear these words in an audio pattern. Later, a teacher assigns students to write down words they have never heard before. Without subtitles or lyrics, students will have to rely on the sounds they think they have heard to make a guess at how to spell this unfamiliar word.

Conclusions

Blogging has become a useful up-to-date instrument for teaching and learning English. Classroom blogs can have a positive impact on mastering learners' skills. Therefore using blogs in English classes requires an effective implementation of blogging correlated with the learners' needs and interests.

For those teachers who would like to have computer literacy in blogging, the authors suggest two options of blog creation, which vary in the instructions from beginners to professional computer users: self-hosted blogs and free blogging platforms.

For pedagogical purposes, a teacher may find a number of benefits that advantage blogging in English training. Mutually, it creates a great opportunity for class improvement in all types of educational skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In order to use a blog for pedagogical purposes, at the beginning of semester it is necessary to explain students blogging purposes, the implementation and the way to give an effective feedback.

The article has proved that students who participated in the blogging project expressed interest in continuing to use blogging for mastering their skills. The survey findings provide justification that blogging is a perfect motivator for better learning. Further research will be focused on discussing the other classroom tools to motivate learners in mastering English.

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