Exploring Japanese EFL university student attitudes toward blogging

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Abstract

This paper describes the implementation of a blogging project and the attitudes toward blogging in English at a private university in Japan. The researchers describe the growth and use of blogging with specific advantages for second language learners highlighted. A pre- and post-survey conducted among 165 first year university students measured the attitudes of students toward technology and the use of blogs as a fluency writing tool. The results showed that the students maintained overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward blogging in English and recognized it as a useful activity for improving their writing and second language acquisition.

Introduction

The Growth of Blogging

Now that the first decade of the twenty-first century has drawn to a close, blogs have become a relatively commonplace feature of the cultural landscape in much of the developed world. However, according to Ward (2004), it was only as recently as 1997 that the term "weblog" (usually shortened to "blog") was first used, and not until the Gulf War of 2003 that publishing via blogs ("blogging") truly burst into the public consciousness.

Ward (2004) defines a blog as "a website that is updated regularly and organized chronologically according to date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards" (p.1). Content is usually created and published ("posted") by an

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individual or a small group and, in contrast to many personal home pages, is intended for a broad readership. Blogging is made quite simple by weblog providers, such as blogger.com, which provide templates that dispense with any need for technical skills on the part of the person maintaining the blog (the "blogger"). This ease of use, coupled with the availability of extra features not found on regular web pages (particularly the comments feature that enables readers to write responses directly onto the blog) has fuelled the recent rapid growth of blogging. Anyone who feels the need to share their opinions with others and get prompt feedback from the diverse international community online can do so for free, as regularly as they wish.

Fellner and Apple (2006) report that, as of 2005, thirty-two million Americans were reading blogs, while in Japan there were well over three million blogs, and at least sixteen million people were visiting them more than once a month. This surge in the popularity of blogging surely compels language teachers to consider the potential benefits of incorporating it into the curriculum, particularly in writing classes.

How Blogging Benefits Language Learners

To date, surprisingly little research on the effectiveness of blogging as a learning tool in the EFL classroom has been published, but from what has appeared it is clear that it has a positive impact on student motivation. Fellner and Apple (2006), for example, found that even Japanese students with low TOEIC scores, who were also apparently disinterested in learning English, responded with unmistakable enthusiasm to maintaining blogs in English. Familiar fixtures of the classroom, such as journal writing, can seem fresh and interesting to students when transferred onto an online format. Research over recent decades (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Dornyei, 2001) has consistently indicated the important correlation between student motivation and successful language acquisition.

Another study with Japanese university students produced similar results. Pinkman (2005) found that "learner-perceived benefits of using blogs included increased interest and motivation to use English because of interaction with, and feedback from, classmates and teachers" (p.12). This draws attention to the crucial element in the popularity of blogging, that is, interaction. Blogging blends the interactivity of speech with the permanence of writing, thereby promoting a sense of audience. Students who complete assignments to be read by their teacher for purely evaluation purposes may struggle to raise much enthusiasm for the task. However, when writing for a blog, students have an audience in mind from which they anticipate ongoing feedback. This tends to influence the way they express themselves, with more of their own personality coming out as a result. Readers

become partners in communication rather than evaluators, which can lead to frank and enjoyable exchanges.

In an EFL classroom, the audience typically consists of classmates, so the flow of communication facilitates the development of a collaborative spirit or a sense of a shared learning experience within the class. Ward (2004) further asserts that blogging "provides the ability to communicate without the inhibitions and preconceptions that accompany most face-to-face interactions" (p.4). This is particularly helpful for shy students as it allows them to express themselves and develop relationships with classmates more easily.

Furthermore, feedback from classmates may "enhance the development of student reflectivity" (Stiler & Philleo, 2003, p.2). If, for instance, a reader comments that he or she has been unable to grasp the intended meaning of a particular phrase or sentence, the writer becomes aware of a language issue to address, and may come to appreciate that writing is a process. Reflection of this sort is a fundamental component of learner autonomy, "a process that enables learners to recognize and assess their own needs, to choose and apply their own learning strategies or styles, eventually leading to the effective management of learning" (Penaflorida, 2002, p.346). Reflection need not be confined to purely language related benefits either. Rebuttals to opinions they have posted on their blogs may lead students to reconsider their views. Similarly, if they have mentioned a personal problem, helpful advice may soon arrive.

Simply writing more often, which keeping a blog encourages, is another positive step that students can take towards improving their English *outside* the classroom, not only in it. Pinkman (2005) found that "learners who participated in the blog project were interested in continuing to blog even after the semester finished" (p.12). The value of writing often has already been strongly suggested by research. Working with Japanese university students in an English Intensive course, Fellner and Apple (2006) found that students "improved their writing fluency: they more than tripled their writing output, while at the same time improving their lexical frequency levels" (p.15). The researchers defined fluency as the number of words written in a given time, while lexical frequency referred to the difficulty level of words based on how often they appear in written English. They set the same time limit for blog writing each day yet found a steady increase in the number of words, as well the number of low frequency ("difficult") words, that students produced.

Finally, there are also some basic practical advantages associated with blogging. Although perhaps easy to overlook, part of preparing students to learn outside the classroom involves helping them develop some confidence in using a computer. In a nation renowned for its technological prowess, it is surprising to see how many Japanese students still reach university level without having acquired

even basic competence in this area. Keeping a blog can help address this, as well as improve student typing speeds, which may serve them well someday in the workplace. Also, "unlike notebooks, blogs cannot be forgotten at home, are more easily accessible (only one person at a time can read a diary while an entire class has simultaneous access to one students' blog), and are more easily commented on" (Fellner & Apple, 2006, p.17).

Overall, the literature supports utilizing blogs as a motivating fluency writing activity in the EFL writing class. However, the studies of blog use in Japanese universities mentioned above suffer from inadequate sample size. This study seeks to solidify their findings with a more comprehensive look at student attitudes toward blogging in the EFL classroom by addressing the following research questions:

1. What experience do typical first year Japanese university students have with blogging?
2. What are their attitudes toward using blogs as a language learning tool?
3. Are these attitudes maintained over the course of a semester?

Methodology

Participants

Thirteen classes of first year International Studies majors at a private university in Japan participated in the blogging project. Students elected to study English as their foreign language component. The students were placed into classes based upon a TOEIC test taken prior to the beginning of the semester. The TOEIC scores ranged from 185 to 820, with a mean score of 515. The pre-survey was administered to 165 students, seven of whom were unavailable for the post-survey. Out of the 165 in the pre-survey sample, 68% were female and 32% were male.

Procedure

The blogging project was a component of the writing course where students focused on writing academic paragraphs and essays covering a wide range of topics and several different genres. At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to create blogs using the free blogging software Blogger (http://blogspot.com). Blogger was chosen for several reasons. First, some of the instructors had previous experience using Blogger and believed this would facilitate assisting students and other instructors in creating their own blogs and blogging networks. Also, blogger was selected for its user-friendly and multilingual interface which would allow students to switch to their native language if there were problems while blogging independently outside of the classroom.

The blogging project was viewed by the instructors as a counterbalance to the

often procedural and rigid requirements of academic writing. The blogs were devised as a communicative and fluency writing task where students could write and share about more casual and everyday topics more closely related to their lives. The blogs were part of the course grade and were assessed based upon completion and volume, with extra points awarded to those who wrote more. The instructors informed the students that the blogs would not be assessed based upon grammar, spelling, or mechanical errors. The blogs were published online within a classroom network and instructors required students to read each other's blogs and post comments. Classes were held in a PC writing lab and instructors often gave blog topic assignments in class, allowing students to begin writing but usually finishing as part of homework. Students were given topics to write about each week and then required to comment on at least three other classmates' blogs the following week. The idea was to not only encourage students to write freely and for pleasure, but to expose them to each other's writing and enjoy the process of giving and receiving immediate feedback.

Data Elicitation

The students were given a pre- and post-survey that investigated students' experience and use of technology, attitudes toward the use of technology, and more specifically toward the use of blogging as a language learning activity. The survey was administered during the second week of class and the final week of a fourteen week semester. The pre- and post-surveys consisted of multiple choice questions with some questions including an additional option to leave open-ended comments. The questions were administered through an online survey software and instructors allowed time in class for students to complete the survey. Questions that elicited degrees of frequency or agreement were done using a 4-point Likert scale with answer choices (e.g., Q. How often . . .?: (1) Almost everyday, (2) 3−5 times a week, (3) Once or twice a week, (4) Less than once a week; Statements Q 6−10 and Q 12−15: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Somewhat Agree, (3) Somewhat Disagree, and (4) Totally Disagree).

Table 1   Questions in the pre- and post-surveys

Q 1	How often do you use a computer?
Q 2	What activities do you do on a computer?
Q 3	Before taking this course, what was your experience with blogging?
Q 4	I enjoy writing in English.
Q 5	Having a class blog is a fun activity.
Q 6	Blogging helps you to get to know your classmates better.

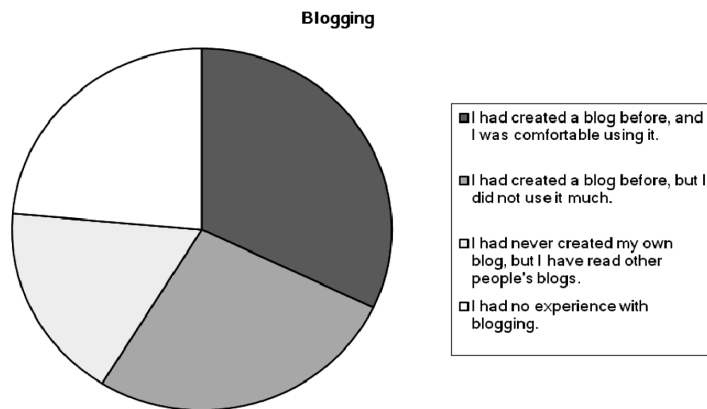| Q 7	Blogging is useful for improving your English ability.
Q 8	Blogging is useful for improving English writing ability.
Q 9	How do you choose which blog to comment on?
Q 10	I feel happy when I receive a comment on my blog.
Q 11	I want to write more when I receive a comment on my blog.
Q 12	I want to post on the commenter's blog when I receive a comment on my blog.
Q 13	I do not care if anyone comments on my blog.
Q 14*	I would like to continue blogging as a class activity.
Q 15*	I would like to continue blogging on my own.
Q 16*	Which blog features did you use during this semester?

*Additional questions included in the post-survey

Results

Pre-survey findings
Q 1: How often do you use a computer?

Answer	N
Almost everyday	58
3–5 times a week	54
Once or twice a week	44
Less than once a week	9
Total	**165**

The survey results showed a wide range of student experience with technology. According to the survey given at the beginning of the school semester, 35% of the students reported using a computer every day, and 33% said they used one three to five times a week. Overall, just 5% of the respondents estimated their computer usage at less than once a week. The most common activity listed was class work (70%), followed by net surfing (58%), social networking (48%), email (43%), and media downloads (42%).

Although only a third reported blogging as one of their regular computer activities, 59% said they had created a blog before, and 32% of respondents said they were comfortable using a blog. Of those who had never started a blog themselves, about half answered that they had at least read other people's blogs. Only 24% of the students surveyed claimed to have no experience with blogging.

Blogging

- I had created a blog before, and I was comfortable using it.
- I had created a blog before, but I did not use it much.
- I had never created my own blog, but I have read other people's blogs.
- I had no experience with blogging.

Post-survey findings

It was important to see the students' attitude toward blogging at the beginning of the project so that we could compare the result with their feelings about blogging after a full semester of doing it as a regular assignment.

Q 5: Having a class blog is a fun activity.

Answer	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Totally Agree	95	81
Somewhat Agree	58	68
Somewhat Disagree	11	9
Totally Disagree	1	0
Total	**165**	**158**

Q 6: Blogging helps you get to know your classmates better.

Answer	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Totally Agree	89	98
Somewhat Agree	59	52
Somewhat Disagree	16	7
Totally Disagree	1	1
Total	**165**	**158**

Overall, the respondents' initial attitudes toward blogging were very positive with 93% saying that they thought the class blogging project would be fun and 90% agreeing that blogging would help them to get to know their classmates better.

Q 7: Blogging is useful for improving my English.

Answer	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Totally Agree	71	52
Somewhat Agree	84	92
Somewhat Disagree	7	14
Totally Disagree	3	0
Total	**165**	**158**

Q 8: Blogging is useful for improving my English writing ability.

Answer	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Totally Agree	90	64
Somewhat Agree	69	80
Somewhat Disagree	5	14
Totally Disagree	1	0
Total	**165**	**158**

A total of 94% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that blogging would be useful for improving their general English ability, and that number increased to 96% when questioned specifically about writing ability. In other words, the students' expectations about blogging were overwhelmingly positive.

The researchers were particularly interested to find whether those positive feelings would continue after three months of posting their thoughts and comments online as a course assignment. According to the results of our follow-up survey, the students' attitudes did remain overwhelmingly positive.

The number of students agreeing somewhat or strongly that the blogging activity was "fun" remained constant at 94%. Several students made comments such as, "It's fun to write and comment on friend's blog," and "Blogging in English is fun!!"

Those who felt blogging helped them get to know their classmates better increased by 5% to 95%. Building rapport with classmates was also mentioned in several comments, including, "this was fun. [I] enjoyed this because [I] could know my class mates well," and "[I] think we could get 2 know each other well!"

Though dropping slightly from the initial survey, both the number of respondents who agreed that blogging helped their overall English ability, as well as those who thought it helped their writing ability in particular, was a solid 91%. This

shows that the vast majority still believed blogging was a beneficial language learning activity. One student's comment expressed this feeling particularly well:

> Since I am not good at writing interesting sentences, it was hard for me to post messages on my blog. So I spent many time typ[ing] the sentences. However, this work is the very thing which leads to my skill up. Sometimes I feel reluctant to write it, but I think that trying to keep writing is the best thing. Therefore, I want to continue to write blog.

When asked whether they would like to continue blogging during the next semester, 89% gave affirmative responses, and 77% even expressed an interest in blogging on their own in English in the future.

In addition to supporting the quantitative data, the comments students made provided reflection in areas not covered by the questions themselves. One student highlighted the draw of technology itself, saying "any activities that have something to do with computer is pretty fun." Another mentioned the benefit of being exposed to blogging in general, commenting that "It was good for me because I had never written blog in English." Although not a specific goal of the course, one comment mentioned an added bonus: "My typing speed improved [using] blogging."

Nearly all of the comments were positive, but several offered criticism, in particular in the area of grammar correction:

> "I want my teacher to correct our words' mistakes."
> "Please check our blogs and tell me mistakes of gramm[a]r."
> "I want you to correct my blog's mistakes."

Discussion

The underlying aim of this study was to describe the implementation of blogging as a regular fluency writing activity in one language program so that other educators could make a more informed decision about whether to try blogging as part of their own course curriculum. Prior experience with and access to technology are important factors to be considered. Nearly all the students in this study reported using a computer regularly, and certainly beginning this activity with some degree of familiarity with computers and the Internet made focusing on the writing and communication aspects of the project easier. Although three quarters of the students had prior experience with blogging, for the majority, this was their first experience as a blogger.

With that taken into consideration, these students had an overwhelmingly

positive attitude toward blogging in English as a class activity. The vast majority expected to like blogging, and after an entire semester of doing it weekly, they continued to see it positively. They rated blogging as beneficial to their writing as well as overall English ability. Moreover, students considered blogging to be an enjoyable activity, as well as a good way to build rapport with their classmates.

However, there are certainly other aspects of blogging that should be investigated further. It would be interesting to see if blogging would be equally successful among other age groups or those without as much prior experience with technology. Other areas for further research include the selection of blogging topics, in-class versus out-of-class blogging, and comparison to both traditional handwritten journaling and other online writing venues, such as social networking sites and forums. Although the majority of students in this study reported that they would continue blogging, future studies could investigate to what extent these intentions become reality.

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