外国語として英語のブログを使った作文講座：成功への課題

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Blogging in an L2 Academic Writing Course: Challenges to Success

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Blogging has aroused the interest of ESL/EFL teachers who see blogging as a simple and low cost way for students to experience writing in a digital format and a means of discussing issues related to their classroom work and their lives (Bloch, 2007). Blogs can be set up either by a teacher or a student, without fees, on a blogging service. Blogs can be set up for individual students, a group of students, or for an entire class. One question raised by the accessibility and low cost of blogging is how to use blogging successfully for improving L2 learners' composition skills.

The focus of this paper will be on challenges and successes using blogging in an L2 academic writing course in a Japanese college. This paper first addresses the aims of implementing blogging. Following that is an examination of the efficacy in achieving those aims and a breakdown of initial, ongoing, and future challenges.

Aims

Reasons for utilizing a blog in this particular class of 19 college juniors (18 Japanese and one Taiwanese) are for 1) dissemination of information, 2) promotion of English reading and writing improvement, 3) exchange of ideas between students and teacher, 4) collection of measurable responses from all students, and 5) reduction of physical paper handling combined with faster distribution via digital transmission. At the beginning of the course, the students in this class were generally familiar with blogs, but their experience was limited to reading them.

One reason for utilizing blogging in the course is to make teacher expectations of students clear. Another goal is for students who miss a class to be able to keep up with classmates. For these considerations, the instructor can use blogging to share syllabi, assignments, writing samples and links to sites pertinent to the course.

A second reason for introducing blogging is for students to be actively reading and writing in English language. The students have generally poor English keyboarding skills. They are also not as likely to search and browse in English as they are in Japanese. Access to English material links could promote a habit of conducting Internet activities in English. They need practice to improve their skills and successes to build confidence. The blog is one more venue for students to read and type in English.

In order to encourage students to carry out Internet searches and reading in English, the instructor has an option of linking English language feeds to the course weblog site. Following are two of the linked feeds.

Academic Writing Blog. On this feeder there are helpful APA style guidelines.

The Japan Times: All Stories. This feeds well-written articles to anyone interested in world news and Japanese news.

A third reason for utilizing a blog is to promote exchange with the instructor and classmates. As will be detailed later in this paper, students contribute their original compositions to the blog. Student contributions can refresh and maintain an interesting blog. (Selingo, 2004) Another advantage is nearly instant sharing potential of the blog. Classmates and teacher, as well as others, can view the contribution immediately after the student posts. Those who view it can, in turn, respond to the submission upon viewing it. All individuals involved in the blog can participate in collaboration and revision. Blogging makes students' material accessible for subsequent reflection and analysis, allowing participants to revisit and revise their artifacts. There is opportunity for feedback and potential scaffolding of new ideas. (Ferdig, 2004)

In this writing course, the collaboration between peers is the most attractive feature of blogging. Students can write contributions to one publication. Sean Alfano writes that blogs "offer young people not only a sounding board for what's on their mind, but also feedback and validation from others, who can comment on what they write using a feedback mechanism on the blog itself." (2006) In addition, blogs promote multiple perspectives. One-sided perspectives of newspapers are replaced by debates exploring multiple facets of an idea or concept. (Siemens, 2002) Blogs also facilitate faster response to writing than traditional methods. We don't have to wait until the next

day's, next week's, or next month's publication, as with a newspaper or magazine. Response can be written immediately after reading, hearing or viewing a post.

A fourth reason for including blogging in this course is that the instructor can use the blog as a tool for gathering measurable samples from every individual in the class. Whereas in a discussion, even with good open-ended questions, one can`t practically receive responses from all students in a class of more than a few individuals, a blog is a forum for every single student to respond in a well-thought-out manner. Beyond that, students can respond to each other as well as to instructor responses. These responses also can be included in assessment.

A fifth aim of utilizing blogging is lessening the amount of students' papers carried around for reading, correction and redistribution. The instructor can respond to student writing electronically and students can receive feedback instead of waiting for it at the next class meeting. The blog enables the teacher or peers to evaluate and give feedback in one convenient place.

Lessons

Following are results of lessons in which students used blogging in the Academic Writing class.

Lesson A

The main objectives of an early posting assignment were for students to successfully access the class blog site, properly compose an opinion paragraph, and to respond to a classmate's paragraph via the blog. As mentioned above, the students in this class are generally familiar with blogs, but their experience is limited to reading them. In this lesson the teacher guided the Academic Writing students during their initial entries onto the class blog site. In this initial trial, 13 of the 16 students (81%) in attendance successfully composed an opinion paragraph on the site. In addition, those with extra time were requested to respond to a classmate's paragraph via the blog site. Ten students (62%) responded to a classmate's paragraph during the same 90-minute class meeting. One student who was absent from the class successfully submitted a paragraph on the class site eight days later.

Lesson B

In a later lesson, during which students were to compose a problem-solution paragraph in class, based on an outline each of them had composed prior to the class meeting, 16 of 16 students attending successfully posted a paragraph during class. As in the

opinion paragraph lesson, those with extra time were requested to respond to a classmate's paragraph via the blog site. Two students (12%) responded to a classmate's paragraph during the same class meeting.

Lesson C

   Another lesson followed a unit about cause and effect. In this lesson, students were to post an original effects paragraph on the class blog site, then read the posted effects paragraph of a classmate and respond to that paragraph via the blog. Seventeen of the 17 students in attendance submitted an effects paragraph to the blog site. For security of privacy the teacher did not clear two of these paragraphs for posting because the writers used their full names. Therefore actual postings available for classmates to read were 88%. Also, during the class meeting, 15 responses to classmate paragraphs (88%) were posted.

   Below is one student effects paragraph, followed by student comments posted during the same 90-minute class meeting. All are taken from the class blog site.

    paragraph by Natsuki: *These days, most people have a cell phone and PC. They use the Internet as tool to communicate and search. There are some effects of the Internet on our lifestyle. First of all, we can always contact with anyone who lives in another place. In the past, people wrote a letter to contact with someone before the Internet spread. To use the internet, there is not time lag. Additionally, we can buy something that we want on the Internet. There are Internet shopping sites, so we do not need to go out to shop. We can buy something anywhere and anytime. It is good way to use our free time wisely. On the other hand, communication with other face to face is less than before. People depend on the Internet to communicate with others like SNS. We need more time to talk with face to face. The Internet is very convenient and useful, but we should be careful how to use the Internet.*

comment by Ami: *I think your conclusion is very important. There is force in what you argues.*

comment by KM: *I like your conclusion. You give us not only some good information about internet but also bad effect. That's important for us to notice that there is a shadow behind convenience and usefulness. Also, we should be careful not to rely on smartphone or iPhone too much.*

comment by Miyuki: *I think so too. I like to shopping on internet. additionally of your opinion, I think that we should know about cybercrime and should be careful to usage internet, telephone. and our life will become more confortable.*

<u>Lesson Successes</u>

Student success was measurable based on their posts to the blog cite. Students composed in paragraph form successfully by the third posting, Lesson C. They followed the guidelines of writing an introductory sentence and a topic sentence at the beginning. Clarity of topic sentences varied. Students used transition words to help the reader follow the paragraph flow. Students supported their topic sentences with supporting sentences.

The students in this study respond enthusiastically to classwork involving being connected to the Internet. The blogging is no exception. From the first lesson, students cooperated enthusiastically with the instructor and helped each other with mechanics of posting contributions. For the three writing assignments in this study, the lowest posting rate was 81%, while for one assignment there was 100%. (For one assignment an absent student also made her paragraph available for all classmates to read.)

Regarding exchange of ideas between students and teacher, the blog proved to be successful. As Patricia Deubel writes, blogging can be a vehicle to ensure that everyone is heard as a valued member of the learning community. She writes that in a typical classroom, even when the teacher poses an open-ended question,

"there are always a few who dominate discussion. Too often students state opinions without solid support from content they are studying. Sometimes they drown out others. There are always disengaged students who pray you don't call on them and others who might have something truly relevant to say, but are too shy to do so. The discussion is often teacher-student centered, rather than also including student-student dialog." (2007)

Student responses to classmates ranged from 12% to 88% being posted. By the third lesson, the teacher managed to monitor all student postings and respond with comments immediately to any student posts, including during class.

<u>Challenges to achieving aims of blogging</u>

<u>initial challenges:</u>

Setting up the blog site requires selecting a blog host, registering, formatting a layout and choosing blog settings. Concerning blog hosts, there are numerous companies, such as WordPress, Blogger and Tumblr.com offering free or low fees for individuals to start blogs. Considerations for the first-time user to select a host include colleague or peer recommendations, fees, and familiarity with hosts. In the case of this study, the college has no established host. This allows unlimited freedom of choice.

Registering requires association with an established email account of the administrator, in this case the instructor. This instructor discovered formatting the blog layout can be overwhelming to the uninitiated, but later found that making decisions about layout can be relatively easy after looking at appealing sites of already established class blogs. Regarding choosing settings, this takes familiarizing oneself with the features and functions of the particular host program.

One challenge for the instructor is the longer times required for typing clear feedback, contrasted with the simple, hand-written corrections and comments on a hard copy. Also, needing a PC or tablet and an Internet connection limits where and when student writing can be read.

Guiding students along while learning to operate a blog oneself is also a challenge to an instructor new to blogging. Cooperation is crucial. Students must transfer current knowledge to learning how to blog. Some of them are quite savvy with their personal tech, and assist classmates who catch on slowly.

ongoing challenges:

One continual challenge found during the course of this blogging class is operating and maintaining a blog. Maintaining a good quality, edifying blog, or at least one worth looking at, requires effort and time. This could be stressful for someone who is not well acquainted with and good at using blog tools. In addition, the risk of posting something we later regret is a real risk with blogging. As with email, writing something hastily, then sending it out with the simple push of one key can problematic. Managing one's time and proofreading carefully before publishing are two challenges. As blog administrator, the instructor can edit blog entries, so mistakes can be revised, if they are caught.

Checking student submissions for proper citation of sources is a continuing challenge. Students in freshman through senior classes are accustomed to finding information on line, but are poor at selecting the most appropriate for their purposes. Additionally, they are generally poor at citing references properly, if at all. In this writing course students are expected to credit the work and ideas of others. With blogging the instructor can guide students in citing references in their submissions. This is one more responsibility adding to the challenges of maintaining the course blog. It is also an opportunity to reinforce learning.

Looking out for safety of students using the blog is another challenge. While blogging can be a positive venue for education and socialization, there are safety concerns. Alfano (2006) and others list some risks, such as personal information on blogs making

it easy for a stranger to locate them, call them or send them e-mail. Additionally, not only school students, but all of us need to bear in mind that individuals online may not be who they say they are. In this study, the teacher did not permit some student submissions to be posted to the blog because of full name use. Hence, classmates did not have the benefit of seeing the ideas included in these compositions. Nor did classmates have the chance to compose responses to them.

Access to technology—systems and facilities—can be a barrier. Some students without Internet at home, for example, could potentially be at a disadvantage. One student in the writing course composed initial drafts on her smartphone. This led to incompatible formatting on documents that she worked with later on the classroom computer and contributed to her lagging behind classmates in progress during class. Fortuanely, this college has made advances in order to increase student access to PCs, update software and increase Wi-Fi areas. This is encouraging.

future challenges:

One advantage of giving students an opportunity to blog their writing assignments is richness of media that an individual can incorporate. Students can not only write, but also add media such as photographs, sound, and even video content, whereas in a word-processed paper, students are limited to words and still images. Promotion within the course of greater media incorporation is a future challenge for the instructor. Students can transfer current knowledge to blogging. How can the instructor promote student creativity? How can one foster use of student skills in media and use of software applications that are beyond the instructor's skills?

Some potential benefits of student contributions are collaboration with 1) peers within the class, 2) peers in other classes and 3) individuals in other countries. Students in this study successfully exchanged ideas with classmates. Next steps might include, as Bloch mentions, contribution to discussion of issues in the public sphere throughout the world (2007).

Unmeasured in this study is whether or not ready access to English material links on the class site promotes a habit of conducting Internet activities in English. Does this encourage students to search or read in English more than they would without such links? This is another area for further research.

Conclusion

In this study, favorable results show that target outcomes are achievable using a blog for an L2 writing course. Initial challenges of implementing a blog require considerable time and work, especially for the novice. Continuing challenges include maintaining user privacy, monitoring submissions and maintaining overall quality. Considering measured benefits of student submissions and responses to classmates, continued blog use is appropriate for this academic writing course. Measurement of success in future endeavors, such as collaboration with peers and individuals outside of Japan is yet unmeasured in this group of students.

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