World Conference on Technology, Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Using Blogs in EFL Teaching - A Case Study of Macedonia

Lulzime Kamberi* 

*State University of Tetovo, Ilindenska, Tetovo, Macedonia

Abstract

Seeking to promote autonomy in language learning and the value of technological support in language acquisition, this paper reports initial results from a study into the effectiveness of computer-assisted second/foreign language instruction in an English Language Methodology course, conducted over two semesters over the years 2013/2014, at the department of English Language and Literature, at the Philological Faculty, State University of Tetovo, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Applying content analysis (Silverman, 2005) to identify themes biases and meaning, the study investigated the effect of Blogs in second language acquisition as well as students’ attitudes towards Blogs. Convenience sampling among students enrolled in the course identified a non-random sample of 58 students representing 80% of the possible cohort. Initial quantitative analysis applying descriptive and inferential statistics (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) were applied to analyze the effect of the Blog on learning outcomes. Content analytical procedures were then applied to student interviews to confirm the descriptive and inferential statistics previously established.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Istanbul University.

Keywords: adult learners; Blog; foreign language; Macedonia; learning outcomes

1. Introduction

With the development of new technology, teachers around the globe are trying to find innovative and effective ways to incorporate technology in their classes. In the same way, language teachers are trying to capitalize on this

* Corresponding author:
E-mail address: l.kamberi12@gmail.com
trend by utilizing strategies for creating computer assisted teaching environments in the hope of making learning easier for students, promoting learner autonomy and independence, and modernizing to make it more attractive for the computer age generation.

As a teacher of methodology, I have always tried to find some ways of making learning more appealing, promoting learner autonomy, and critical thinking skills and motivate students to increase the effectiveness of their communication. In this pursuit, I came across ‘Blogs which are now widely used by various counterparts in the whole world, and increasingly mentioned by such scholars as Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004; Dawley, 2007; etc. I have to admit that I had never heard the term before and had to search a lot and then teach myself, first how to go about creating a Blog, inviting students, and finally teaching them all those skills I had taught myself initially. In this way, I started to use Blogs in my classes, as a support to teaching content.

This paper seeks, therefore, to analyze initial results from a study into the effectiveness of computer-assisted second/foreign language instruction in an English Language Methodology course by using Blogs in EFL teaching and learning. This paper offers tentative suggestions about the significance of using blogging in EFL teaching and learning from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives.

2. Literature Review And Hypotheses

Blogs have been used around the world since at least 1997 when Ian Ring (Wikipedia) termed the name, e-journal. These ‘e-journals’ later became the Blogs we know today and many are hosted by a Google’s sub domain called blogspot.com. In 1999, Pyra Labs opened free-access websites in which anyone could create an account for making their own Blogs, (Warlick, 2007).

Nevertheless, before we continue, let us define the term Blog. According to Dawley (2007), “A Blog, or Weblog, is a page that serves as a personal journal for an individual” (p.205). On the other hand the free Online Dictionary (Farlex) defines a Blog as “a website that displays postings by one or more individuals in chronological order and usually has links to comments on specific postings” (2015).

As can be inferred from the definitions, Blogs are a type of electronic journal in which people can form groups, invite new members, and write on them as well as edit them. These journals can serve as an ideal tool for sharing information with both small and broader audiences, depending on the person who creates it. This is why they are thought to be very motivating and enhance language learning and communication. Therefore, many teachers around the globe are trying to use blogs in their teaching.

One teacher, Pinkman (2005) has used Blogs with her Japanese university students, in integrated skills classes to encourage her students to practice language outside the classroom, reflect on the classes and share ideas on the internet. The students were instructed to post a 150 word entry every week on the Blog, as well as comment on two or three of their classmates’ postings. The study revealed that using Blogs had been a new experience for her students and they had shared and exchanged ideas on the Blog. The majority of her students stated that they would continue to use Blogs after the end of the semester.

In 2014, İnceçay & Genç, conducted a study with university level students using blogs in foreign language writing classes. They aimed to analyze the effect of self-blogging on writing efficacy. Even though their study did not reveal any significant impact on student progress, it showed that students were very motivated and teachers were challenged to introduce another tool for language learning and teaching.

It is not only university teachers that use Blogs, but also middle school teachers. In a study reported by Kajdar &Bull (2004), paper journals have been replaced by Blogs. These Blogs have been used as Digital Story telling online journals. The study has shown that students were very motivated and kept writing regularly on the Blog.

Whatever the results of the various studies have been, as stated by Richardson (2009), who urges teachers to incorporate technology in the classrooms in order to promote learning and motivation, teachers should try new ways in order to motivate learners. This motivation can only be achieved by incorporating various tools of evaluation and
learning, which in one way or another will make our students better learners. Therefore, I decided to incorporate these ‘new’ Blogs into my syllabus, as one grading component.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Goal

This paper reports initial results from a study into the effectiveness of computer-assisted second/foreign language instruction using Blogs and Blogging, in an English Language Methodology course. The study was conducted over each semester of the academic years 2013/2014, at the department of English Language and Literature, at the Philological Faculty, State University of Tetovo, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Students were invited to the blog and after each lecture they had to post questions on the Blog and respond to questions posted by at least two of their peers.

Based on my professional teaching interest and informed by the emerging findings reported in the brief literature review above, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

1. Is there any evidence that Blogging provides substantial support for students’ language improvement?
2. Is there any evidence that Blogs provide significant support for the varying needs of different learner types?
3. What are students’ attitudes towards Blogs and blogging?

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The participants of the study were university students, studying to become EFL teachers. Convenience sampling among students enrolled in Methodology courses identified a non-random sample of 58 students representing 80% of the possible cohort. Their age ranged from 21 to 23 years old.

Seeking to determine the effect of Blogging on foreign language acquisition as well as assessing its impact on learning outcomes, an online questionnaire through Google Drive was sent to 80 students attending the course and 58 responses were received. The questionnaire contained 12 questions which required students to respond based on their blogging experience, the frequency they had used the blog, the effectiveness of it on learning, their feelings and perceptions about it, and any recommendations or suggestions they had for future blogging. The questionnaire was followed by semi-structured interviews seeking to backup the quantitative results.

Data from the questionnaires were quantified using percentages and frequencies to analyze the responses (Fraenkel& Wallen, 2003). Following the questionnaires, the 58 participants were invited to offer their perceptions of the learning experiences they had just completed. 13 of the 58 students agreed to take part in stage 2 of the study. Content analytical procedures based on Silverman, (2006) were then applied to student interviews to confirm the descriptive and inferential statistics previously established.

These results were finally used to make a comparison to evaluate the perceived usefulness of the blogs and the learning outcomes stated on the syllabus, which are generally five: Students’ knowledge and understanding, Applying knowledge and understanding, Making judgments, Communications skills, Learning skills.

3.3.1 The Quantitative Results

Despite expectations established from the literature review, that blogs were seen to enhance language learning and could be evaluated based on the learning outcomes, as well as that participants would show some motivation towards blogging, the results of the quantitative study were contrary to initial expectations. In fact, in line with earlier studies such as those reported by İnceçay&Genç (2014), the quantitative study showed no improvement or impact on the learning outcomes. Blogs, in this study, did not contribute to student learning.

The questionnaire results showed that 89% of the participants had opened the blog at least once throughout the semester. However, 60% of the students were not very enthusiastic about using blogs, whereas 23% were unsure, though the remaining 17% showing some enthusiasm. Similarly, 57% of the students claimed that they did not
know how to use the blog, and that made them very frustrated. Others stated that they either did not have internet in their flats since they came from neighbouring countries, therefore, had to go to an internet cafe in order to check the blog. A few students claimed that there were not many postings; therefore, they were not very interesting.

On the other hand, there were some responses related to learner types and motivation. On a question related to ‘security’, individual students expressed some positive views. One student stated that “it is better because it is not face-to-face interaction. Another interesting response was that ‘it gives me more opportunity because I am a shy student”. While one student favoured the “indirect” interaction, another claimed that “The blog gives me more self-confidence and I am relaxed “.

Nonetheless, according to the Blog statistics, the logging in and off the blog was relatively high, with 1236 total views for a mean of 21 views per student among the total 58 students who were attending the course. Having in mind the fact that one course lasts 15 week, it can be inferred that each student has opened the blog approximately two times a week. Nevertheless, only 28, less than half of the sample participating in the study, contributed to the blog, even though some students believed that it provided a secure place for them to communicate with peers.

3.3.2 The Qualitative Results

To triangulate the results from the quantitative section of the study with those of the qualitative section and to provide a broader perspective on how or why the findings may have been significantly different, students were asked to engage in semi-structured interviews to discuss their experience with the blogs.

Based on the interview responses, it seems that students were divided on their perceptions and had mixed feelings regarding the blog; those who were supportive and those who were not. This was evident from the students’ responses. It was also felt that there must be some changes on the way the blogs were organized.

Those who were supportive generally were very positive about the blog. According to one student, blogs contribute to learning since they “were able to revise the lesson by posting on the blog. Also, they would have to go back and read the lesson again in order to be able to write something”. Another stated that “we can learn about the subject and at the same time from the peer’s responses. We can learn many new words and expressions”. There were also many who stated that “they referred to the blog when they studied for the exam and that was useful”. One of the better students claimed that blogs had been very useful since as she claimed:

Blogs help in many ways; first you have to revise the lesson we have covered in class and then think about a question. Also, you have to check the dictionary for words that you want to use or the order of words while composing sentences and paragraphs. When I have difficulties, I read the other’s questions and mistakes. So I learn from them not to make the same mistakes.

In contrast, students that were not very supportive stated that blogs were not useful and that we should not continue using them. Some reported that they had opened the blog only one time and did not know what to say on the questionnaire nor interview. Some declared that they, “did not care much about the 10% as part of the grade.” while others claimed that “maybe you should divide the percentages, like 2 or 3 percent for each post. In this way, everyone will post five times and be more motivated”.

One theme that derived from the semi-structured interview was the useful student suggestions and recommendations. Some stated that “the teacher should use something from the blog for the exam, I mean the same questions”. Another student proposed that “there should be some way to make an ‘online reminder’ to students to contribute to the blog … maybe remind us on Facebook. You should sign up on Facebook” was among the suggestions for the future blogs. A further recommendation was that students write the homework they are assigned on the blog. In this way, they would be motivated to contribute more to the blog. One respondent suggested that “the teacher should be stricter and force students to post.” Among others, one respondent claimed that we should read the posts in the classroom and in this way make students post on the blog more often.
4. Conclusion

Using a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology based on student questionnaires and interviews, the study addressed three questions analyzing the effect of the blogs. The main aim of the study, as stated in section 3.1 was to analyze the effectiveness of using Blogs and Blogging, to support learning in an English Language Methodology course, based on the learning outcomes described on the syllabus. A secondary aim was to analyze students’ perceptions of their experience with blogging. This study has special importance for students and especially teachers in Macedonia generally because, as Barcelos (2000) observed, “Teaching is a daily search for the learners’ point of view” (p. 73). Therefore, the learners’ points of view, their perceptions and experiences about learning have tremendous importance for all teaching, not only languages but other subjects as well.

Considering the relationship between learning outcomes and the blogs, based on student responses and the first research question, Is there any evidence that Blogging provides more substantial support for students’ language improvement?, it can be argued that there was not enough evidence to indicate any specific blog influence on learning outcomes. One of the learning outcomes is Applying knowledge and understanding. It seems that students could not readily apply what they had studied in the classes and use it for posting on the blog. Another learning outcome is Making judgment. However, there is some evidence leading to the tentative conclusion that students were not able to make any evaluation of the blog since the majority of them had not posted anything. Further, Communication skills could not be achieved through the blogs since only 28 out of the 58 respondents posted regularly, whereas the remaining did only log in and out. The next learning outcome Learning skill could neither be proved nor supported by evidence. Based on the student responses, students were not able to perform professional tasks and show independence in judgment in the professional sphere, which is ELT methodology in this case.

Based on the study results, to the second question posed in the study Is there any evidence that Blogging provides more substantial support for students’ language improvement? blogs appear to have offered some security, as stated by individual respondents, by providing them with an opportunity to post in a relaxed and peaceful atmosphere.

Regarding the last question posed in the study What are students’ attitudes towards Blogs and blogging? It can be inferred that students had mixed feelings about blogs. The majority of them were not sure if blogs could become a successful tool for language teaching and learning since, based on their limited experience; it seemed not to have been the case so far. Only a small number of students claimed that they had learned new vocabulary and phrases from the blogs and by posting on the blog.

One important derivative from the semi-structured interviews was the range of useful student suggestions and recommendations. It is evident that students need more assistance in learning the new skills as well as new ways for motivating them to apply those. Probably, as suggested by students, reminding them on their duty through Facebook or email, time after time, would be more motivating. The assessment strategy suggested by participants, dividing the total 10% of the blog into small parts, 2 percent per post, seems to be a promising, though work-intensive, strategy.

Before teachers can make their learning outcomes and activities more explicit, the findings of this study suggest that they need to be aware of the importance of their students’ facility with the technology and their access to it before perceptions and learning experiences can be meaningfully assessed. One effective way of achieving this might be for teachers to show the results of this study to their students as a point for discussion in a non-graded learning environment before seeking to implement it. In this way, teachers and students can share ideas and experiences which would contribute to both teaching effectiveness and subsequent learning progress.

References