

Weblogs: a tool for EFL interaction, expression, and self-evaluation

Claudia Trajtemberg and Androula Yiakoumetti

The use of blogs in EFL learning and teaching has recently attracted a great deal of research attention. Previous research has demonstrated that blogs foster development of EFL skills. This study, which takes a sociocultural approach, focuses on EFL interaction. Specifically, the study aims to identify the interaction strategies that bloggers employ by exploring both teacher-initiated and student-initiated interactions. An EFL undergraduate class at the University of Chile serves as the vantage point for discussion. Bloggers' posts and comments are thematically analysed for the purposes of this study. It is demonstrated that blogs promote EFL interaction, self-expression, self-evaluation, and a sense of language progress. The study may be of interest to educationists around the world who are interested in identifying how blogs can best be harnessed within foreign language education for the benefit of learners.

Introduction

The pedagogical benefits of using computer-mediated communication (CMC) in L2 learning have been documented by a plethora of researchers (for example Salaberry 2001; Bax 2003). In the last decade, the initial focus on individual L2 learners' work with the computer has shifted to interactions among learners using computers as tools, a shift which is linked to student-centred pedagogical practices.

In this study, interaction is viewed as a multidimensional dynamic concept that is based upon the sociocultural perspective (Lantolf 2000). The sociocultural approach emphasizes the role of social interaction in creating an environment conducive to learning language and to learning about language through language (Warschauer 1997). It highlights the importance of understanding that discourse (written or oral) reflects the meaning-making process between participants in a given social context, and that it is, therefore, dialogical. In Vygotsky's view, learning and teaching are both exploratory and collaborative (Wells 2000). Online personal journals viewable by the general public, called weblogs (or blogs), have the potential of being a unique learning venue where collaboration can take place and interaction among L2 participants can be promoted.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the use of blogs in EFL learning and teaching has recently attracted considerable research attention (Ward 2004; Zhang 2009). Previous empirical studies (Pinkman 2005; Kavaliauskienė, Anusienė, and Mažeikienė 2006)

advocate the use of blogs for the improvement of EFL skills and are indicative of the potential of the weblogging phenomenon to promote learner interaction.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is a paucity of empirical studies carried out in EFL contexts regarding the interaction strategies bloggers employ. The aim of this article is to provide some such empirical evidence and to contribute to the ongoing discussion over the extent to which weblog technology promotes interaction, self-expression, self-evaluation, and a sense of language progress. An EFL undergraduate class at the University of Chile serves as the setting for our study. Online resources in the form of blogs were used for the first time in the educational context of this university as a tool for enhancing students' learning of the target variety.

Blogs and foreign language learning

As new CMC technologies emerge, language teachers and researchers turn their attention to the capability of these new technologies to create learning contexts that might help in the learning of an L2 (Stapleton and Radia 2010). The potential for interaction inherent in blogs, a relatively new CMC technology, resides in the content of the posts, the blogger's self-reflection, and other bloggers' reactions. While bloggers write their own blogs, they also establish social networks where they exchange opinions. Bloggers as initiators of a topic and as participants in interactions thus contribute their knowledge and writing to make the text of a blogging community meaningful. It is our conviction that this interaction enhances learning.

The implications of blogs' capacity to become channels for interaction in the L2 classroom are numerous. Blogs may serve as authentic interactive contexts in which the fact that discourse promotes a number of social functions in real communicative settings is learnt. Blogs may offer opportunities for bloggers to actively engage with each other's writing activities because of blogs' highly collaborative nature. Blogs may promote scaffolding in the sense that less knowledgeable learners can learn from more advanced learners simply by being exposed to their peers' work. Such scaffolding, which is not explicit in nature, may have additional benefits for low achievers: they may experience learning in a less direct but possibly more autonomous way than that which is experienced in a traditional classroom-only setting. We view the autonomy and empowerment that blogs can offer as key elements in fostering learners' confidence and desire to write.

Interacting through the medium of writing may also lead to more reflection on the part of bloggers who have both their own work and their peers' work at their constant disposal (archived in chronological order). Increased reflection and awareness about language may foster a greater level of self-expression and self-evaluation.

The extent of this interaction depends on how much everyone is engaged and involved. Teacher and peer support is fundamental in making this online space a real environment for social interaction and meaningful learning. It is for this reason that the interaction strategies that are employed in written media such as blogs are worthy of continuing research attention. The empirical component of this study aimed to identify such strategies by exploring both teacher- and student-initiated interaction. In addition, the

project investigated students' self-expression, self-evaluation, and sense of language progress.

Project

The initiative of using blogs as an EFL learning tool was suggested by EFL educators at the University of Chile where the principal investigator works. This initiative arose out of a need to promote motivation amongst students to learn English. It is believed that students lack motivation to learn the language and are said to enter university with poor EFL skills. In fact, about 60 per cent of those who enrol at the University are placed in the lowest English level based on the University's entrance English test. It was the educators' and the researchers' belief that, given students' enthusiasm towards technology, blogs would encourage students to experience EFL learning in a new light and to subsequently regard this learning as meaningful. The rationale behind having a blog was to make students feel sufficiently comfortable to express themselves in written English. Students were free to decide whether or what to publish on their blogs without being forced to actively publish anything beyond the prescribed short activities. If students chose to interact with each other, this was interpreted as an indication that learner motivation and autonomy were promoted.

The primary aim of this paper is to identify the interaction strategies that bloggers (teacher and students) utilized. In addition, by examining students' own blogs, the paper aims to explore students' self-expression and awareness of their own as well as their peers' language progress. These aims are set with a view to investigating our initial hypothesis that the collaborative and, at the same time, diary-like nature of blogs can lead to enhanced motivation for interaction and self-expression.

The blogs of 16 students (seven male and nine female) and one teacher were analysed for the purposes of this project. The teacher was a native English speaker. The students were native Spanish speakers between 20 and 22 years of age. They were undergraduates studying Architecture or Graphic Design within the University of Chile who took English as an elective course during the second semester of 2007. Blogs were employed systematically and formally in both EFL teaching and learning. The elective course aimed to develop students' low-level English language skills and focused on general English. To complete the course, students were required to carry out 13 tasks that resulted in short posts on their blogs.

Data were collected in the form of comments left by the teacher and the students and students' last blogging task. The last blog posts were chosen for analysis as they constituted an evaluation of learners' blogging experience. In essence, these posts summarized students' perceptions of using blogs in the EFL class. The class blog can be viewed online at <http://www.arkiclass.blogspot.com>

The researchers' role was limited to constructively evaluating the effect of employing a class blog on students' EFL learning experiences. Permission for this evaluation was granted by the teacher and all the students. Consent to quote from blogs and to use students' usernames (which often corresponded to actual first names) was obtained from all participants who had been briefed in detail on the manner in which their

blogs were to be used. Despite the fact that blogs were created and remain in the public domain, participants were free to request exclusion from the study.

Teacher-initiated interaction

The centrality of the role of the teacher in making new technologies meaningful to students by creating contexts of interpersonal support, motivation, and enthusiasm has been found to be paramount (Ioannou-Georgiou 2006). The teacher of the class systematically left comments on each student's blog as a follow-up to the tasks that the students had written on their blogs. The comments served as feedback on the tasks but, at the same time, aimed to motivate students to elaborate and expand their initial writing and thoughts. The focus therefore was on interaction and communication. To achieve this, the teacher's comments were informal, being reminiscent of a conversational style as opposed to formal written feedback. The use of a relaxed learning atmosphere has also been highlighted as an important motivational strategy in traditional L2 classrooms (Dörnyei 2001). In his effort to promote interaction, the teacher chose not to focus on correcting students' language mistakes.

The first strategy the teacher employed to promote interaction was the inclusion of questions in his comments. This strategy was successful in triggering responses from most students. This strategy may sound self-evident but, because responding to posts was not a syllabus requirement, the abundance of these responses is actually of considerable significance. This choice by students to interact of their own will suggests that interaction took place for its own sake and not simply out of the desire to obtain high grades. The following excerpt is an example of the way the teacher's comments triggered responses from a student. Students had previously completed a task on their favourite piece of technology. Although Xaviera's work included a number of mistakes, the teacher chose to foster an environment in which Xaviera could engage and thus develop her communicative skills. For this reason, the teacher did not correct the student's mistakes but instead asked her a question that triggered her response.

Teacher: Did you used to take many photos before you had a digital camera?

Xaviera: hello Simon, I ask your question . . . I use to take a lot of pictures every time, before and after I had my digital camera, Because I think pictures can captures moments in time. It is almost magic! jaja ok I'll see you soon!

The employment of witty and humourous language to motivate students' responses and engagement was a second teacher strategy. This strategy paid dividends as students systematically became 'interlocutors' in the teacher-initiated written dialogue. The following excerpt from the teacher's comments demonstrates that the teacher aimed to motivate Natalie to engage with him in a relaxed and joking manner. Natalie responded and created a dialogue that is characterized by clever sarcasm in the target language. Examples of such English usage should be noted as students were not previously exposed to authentic communicative learning.

Teacher: What school did you go to? Did you realise you were the half-a-student?

Natalie: I went to the Pedro Poveda Liceo, in Maipú. I thought I could be the 1/2 . . . but I wonder why $\neg\text{--}\neg$ ('cause I have the half of the task, or 'cause of my size $\neg\text{--}\neg$)

Another strategy the teacher used in order to encourage students to engage with him in a meaningful EFL context was the provision of examples from his personal interests. As with the previous strategies, this was also performed in a conversational style that was enthusiastic and upbeat. This strategy seemed to trigger a sense of belonging that made students feel encouraged to leave comments themselves. The following is an example of a comment by the teacher in which he draws on his own experiences. In this case, the comment is for a student (Natalie) who had written a post on television being her favourite piece of technology. The example showcases the considerable effort the teacher took to create a pleasant learning context by offering his own views as to the *South Park* television programme. The teacher's specific strategy makes him sound approachable. Indeed, Natalie responds to her teacher's comments. Her response is interesting as it demonstrates an admirable degree of commitment: she initially replies to her teacher's question and then adds more information to further clarify her own opinion on the programme.

Teacher: Did you see the South Park pilot? I think it's call 'Cartman gets an **** probe', What about the SP movie? Very Funny!

Natalie: No, I haven't see it. I'm a recent South Park fan, I didn't follow them from the beginning.

Natalie: I forgot to say . . . actually, I'm a fan since I watched the movie on cable (Sadam, very funny: P)

Teacher: I'll try 2 remember 2 bring U a copy of the film. Very, Very Funny.

It is obvious from the above discussion that the teacher played a key role in fostering interaction. This finding is in accordance with Pinkman's (2005) study in which students explained that they enjoyed receiving comments from their teacher and that this enjoyment increased their own motivation to blog. Again, it must be emphasized that, in our study, sending comments was not compulsory. The students probably engaged with the teacher because of his supportive attitude that was apparent in the three strategies he employed: question raising, use of witty and humorous language, and provision of examples of his own interests. These strategies may at first look very similar to those used during face-to-face interactions but the fact that students repeatedly returned to their blogs to elaborate or to include additional information highlights the advantage of blog-based interaction over more conventional forms of interactive writing.

Student-initiated interaction

Through his comments, the teacher not only modelled possible ways of writing but also scaffolded students into the process of collaborative writing. Indeed, subsequent to the teacher's cue, encouraging comments were found in the comments that students made on one another's blogs. Such encouragement was normally triggered after a student had written a task on his or her blog to which another student responded using simple but direct messages of approval. It is likely that these comments were a product of the

atmosphere of collaborative learning that the blog had fostered and an indication of considerable learner autonomy. An example of this type of comment was sent by Ismael to Camila after Camila wrote on her blog (as part of a task) about Ismael's blog. Ismael, following the teacher's example of praising Camila's work, also supports his fellow student's efforts.

Teacher: Nice Review Kamii.

Ismael: HOW DARE YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (that picture!! jajaja that is from Glo's brithday right? nice phototoshop)

Camila: jajajajajajaj . . . thanks Simon, im glad you liked it. and the picture isma . . . yes it's from glo's birthday, but it's not a photoshop is just a paint work . . . nice huh?? . . . i laught a lot while i was doing it jejejeje =)

Students also sent comments that included their opinions on issues that had been raised by their peers. The following excerpt demonstates that, following Nick's post on a newspaper article, the teacher and two students commented and expressed their views freely on the topic. Ismael commences interaction by commenting on the actor with which the newspaper article was concerned. His response is indicative of the fact that he was interested in the topic as he was not obliged to comment on Nick's post. The teacher, with his comment, keeps the interest alive which, in turn, motivates Carmina to enter this discussion network and express her own opinions freely.

Ismael: I've only watched Bill Murray in Lost in Translation. I don't remember any other of his acting. I liked that movie.

Teacher: Groundhog Day is very funny, so are the 2 Jim Jarmusch movies he did. 'Broken Flowers' and 'Coffee and Cigarettes'

Carmina: I saw 'Lost in Translation' and 'Broken Flowers' and i liked Bill Murray's work. One day I've started to saw 'Groundhog Day', but I don't like so much so I turned of the tv.

As has been evidenced, commenting was a powerful tool that triggered interaction and communication among students. It was used by students for encouragement and to express opinions. While commenting was not compulsory, it did take place even from the very beginning of the course. As explained previously, this commenting was stimulated by the teacher's deliberate strategies. Students subsequently utilized additional strategies for interacting with each other.

Self-expression

It is likely that a key element in fostering students' satisfaction and motivation to write was being able to express opinions freely in the innovative venue of blogs. Through students' posts, one can see that blogs served as a kind of diary in which they felt safe enough to write about intimate experiences. The impact of blogging even took the participants by surprise. They witnessed the progressive change in the extent and purpose of their writing: at the beginning, some students viewed the blog as a course requirement like any other and, by the end, they experienced its full facilitative potential. It was not only the language *per se* that mattered but also how it was used with and by others and for what purpose. English therefore became both the medium and object of expression. Ismael's, Pedro's, and Pablo's posts below demonstrate that blogging was uniquely

conducive to L2 learning in that, unlike traditional learning, it allowed students to find their own voice and writing style. These findings are in accordance with Bartini's (2008) study that demonstrated that web-enhanced English learning could promote learner satisfaction.

Ismael: Until one afternoon of July, I started posting different things, well written things (I think), with an interesting theme behind, good points of view (I have so many interesting things to say to the world) and the best of them was that I started to write in English. At first I believed that it was a way for keeping the class at the lab, trying that everybody participates.

Pedro: You can share things with other people, not just your friends because is a global network! Anyone can see my blog and do comments about topics I write and by my point of view, I find it amazing. You are connected to the whole world, no geography bounds or limits. When I uploaded my first task, I felt like a child doing a task for school, something very unknown for me. Some embarrassment too, sharing my opinion to anyone is not so easy. I think that making a blog and posting every week about different topics, is a very intensive, interesting a productive exercise to improve your English because you write about things you're interested in and you want to do it better every time you post a new thing. And it's not like a written test, because the test is ridden only by the professor instead by the blog anyone can see your work, how's your English and have a comment about that! You must watch out about what you write!

Pablo: I enjoyed writing on my blog, sometimes I didn't have enough time to be on time on my posts - like now, sorry:) - or sometimes I was a little bit uninspired. But I liked the idea of working in a computer instead of making exercises in a paper, posting in Blogspot has been a new experience to get in touch with technology, I enjoyed 'posting' about my interest and watching the posts and opinions of my classmates.

Self-evaluation and a sense of language progress

The fact that blogs are electronic portfolios that archive the posts from the latest to the oldest in chronological order appears to have had an impact on students' perception of progress. By looking at their writing week after week, students realized how much they had been able to achieve. Also, by doing tasks that had a clear communicative purpose in an authentic context, students seemed to develop a sense of progress and self-evaluation. Evidence of students' sense of improvement comes from Consuelo's, Joana's, and Francisco's blogs:

Consuelo: As you can see my grammar kind of sucks, but believe me it was worst. I think that writing 'long' stories helped me to improve it. Reading also helped me too, because most of the time I watch movies or series in English, or I listen to music, so I have more practice with listening and speaking English. I think that blogging every week helped to create a habit, make my brain work (reading, thinking and writing).

Joana: I think that the experience about the blogs in this class was very good, because it is a most interesting and funny way of understanding which are ourselves wrong, because when you are reading others' blogs, you discover things that when you write don't look it, but

when you see it in others blogs you understand that you did it the same!!! Jajajaja

Fransisco: Because you got your own space where you can tell whatever you want, no matter how boring or frick it could be. That way you also improve your spelling and the use of grammar, in an entertaining way. You also have to take care about the design of what you are publicizing, to get the attention of the readers, so that way you have to look for attractive pictures that everyone can enjoy. Another interesting thing about posting is that you always feel the attraction or the curiosity to see your classmate's post, which never happened in a normal class, so that gives more points to the posting experience!

These data, in the form of students' own words, indicate students' growing motivation to improve their English because of their writings' visibility to others. Of course, a remaining concern is whether the teacher should focus explicitly on linguistic form during online interactions. As Lee (2001) suggests, perhaps the teacher could guide students in re-examining and revising their exchanges. Such re-examination of students' texts is reminiscent of the text-mediational view of sociocultural theory that links the concepts of expression, interaction, and reflection with text and collaboration in the classroom (Warschauer 1997).

The efficacy of blogs

As previously explained, the initiative to incorporate weblogging technology in an EFL class at the University of Chile was stimulated by the fact that students were demotivated to learn the target variety and lacked essential EFL skills. The mere act of writing blogs, reading others' blogs, and witnessing this process as an insider transformed the otherwise solitary activities of reading and writing into more engaging tools for learners. By the end of the course, students felt that writing in the L2 was less threatening than they had previously experienced. They realized that writing in English served a real communicative purpose which was facilitated by the tool as well as the people wielding it: the weblog, the teacher, and students themselves.

Ismael: English class was very useful. I think it's been the best CFG I've taken. I will tell my friends if they want to improve their English in a pleasant ambiance, they should take this class. I'm very grateful. I just hope this blog never dies.

Pavel: The blogsite has become a kind of culture that allows you to be in touch with other people exchange ideas opinions and themes. It is a great tool that it could be used more for education and entertainment.

Fransisco: Thanks for the patience and this entertaining way to understand and make us progress on this language!

Posts such as the ones above are indicative of the fact that, after exposure to the weblogging phenomenon, students' desire to learn was reignited: it is positive attitudes like these that teachers look forward to experiencing in their careers and it is attitudes like these that we should foster in our students.

Conclusion

The burgeoning research interest in the use of blogs in EFL learning is crucial to identifying how this technology can best be harnessed for the benefit of

learners. It was only half a decade ago when Eastment (2005) sagely noted that, to her surprise, not many EFL blogs existed. Five years on, blogs are more prevalent than ever and increasingly are being successfully utilized in the L2 classroom. Our study clearly attests to the usefulness of blogs. **Blogs assist in motivating learners to use language for real communicative purposes and to write in English in ways that they have not previously experienced. Self-expression, self-evaluation, and a sense of language progress are promoted when students interact in a collaborative space.**

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The authors

Claudia Trajtemberg is an English language educator at the University of Chile. Her research interests include sociocultural theory and EFL teaching, the use of digital technologies in EFL learning, and academic writing. Her current teaching focus is English for biomedical scientists.

Androula Yiakoumetti is an applied linguist within the Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University. She has published on the topics of bidialectism, language attitudes, EFL learning, and language-teacher training. She lectures on L2 acquisition, bilingual education, and multilingualism and language planning
Email: androula.yiakoumetti@cantab.net