

Blogs in TEFL: A New Promising Vehicle *

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Abstract: Weblogs, or blogs for short, were created as a tool for people to create online journals without the need of any programming experience or knowledge. Although not originally intended for educational purposes, blogs are drawing attention from EFL educators. The paper is intended to provide a definition of a blog, to analyze the features of a blog, to formulate possible ways to use a blog in EFL classes, and to discuss potential advantages and shortcomings of using blog in EFL. In conclusion, blogs are a new promising vehicle of extreme value for teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL).

Key words: blog; TEFL; educational technology

1. Introduction

Human beings possess a powerful desire to communicate by which technological innovations are frequently driven. Research in computer-mediated communication environments has undergone many rapid and radical developments, and the blog is simply one of the latest.

1.1 Definition of a Blog

The word “blog” is short for “web log” (weblog). It is used both as a noun and a verb. As a noun, a blog is also known as an online journal or web diary, as well as a content management system or an online publishing platform. As a verb, “to blog” means to write on one’s weblog. Essentially, a weblog is a chronologically organized site with the latest entry appearing at the top of the page. It is updated by an individual or a group of individuals. There are other items incorporated in various blogs depending on what each blogger may want in their own blogs. Optional items include calendar, archives, comments, permalinks, blogrolls, RSS and trackback, and the like. Some blog authors may choose to make use of add-ons and/or plug-ins to enhance their sites.

1.2 Common Features of a Weblog

In comparison with other internet tools, a weblog at least has the following common features:

It’s a type of website easy and quick to create. It is organized by time (chronologically backwards) and by posts (or postings) which are usually short and frequently posted. Readers can often respond through a “comments” feature. One can publish instantly to the web without having to learn HTML or use a web authoring program. It is usually maintained by one person, but there are multi-person blogs. It can be free or very low-cost to create. The use of links is a common distinguishing characteristic. The author’s voice and personality often comes through.

The first industry to really embrace blogs was the news media. Journalists post their stories to the blog while readers subscribe to the blog news and feeds to receive up-to-the-minute information on a variety of topics. Blogs are now being used for many different purposes, such as web publishing, journalism, and education. In

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educational circles, blogs are frequently referred to as “edublogs” or “schoolblogs”. The following section is designed to discuss some key issues concerning the application of a blog in EFL teaching, including how to create a blog, how to use a blog, as well as what advantages and problems may be involved in its application.

2. Application of Blogs in the EFL Classroom

There are numerous possibilities for a blog to be used in the EFL classroom setting. Current research has already done some tentative explorations in this field (Ward, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Kennedy, 2003; Campell, 2003). Special mention should be made of Campbell(2003) who made a great contribution by suggesting three types of weblogs, the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog, with each type used in a different way. Thus he *unintentionally* sketched out a model for weblogs to be put to immediate use with EFL classroom learning. Though not claimed by Campbell himself and imperfect in itself, the so-called “Campbell’s model” is still recognizable in our eyes.

2.1 The Tutor Blog

This is a type of weblog that is run by the tutor for the learners. It may be used in the following manners:

(1) It gives daily reading practice to the learners. Sometimes students find assigned reading materials are too boring, difficult, or hard to relate with. However, entries are kept short, geared towards the learner interest, and linked to related online sources for further reading if desired. Vocabulary used in class can be recycled this way. New vocabulary words can be linked to definitions on other sites found with a search engine. Furthermore, a casual, natural writing style can be used by the tutor to develop learner familiarity with native language patterns.

(2) It promotes exploration of English websites. Any entry made by the tutor can and ought to encourage further exploration of the Internet in English by linking to related articles, and content based websites. For those learners reluctant to step outside the comfort of exploring the Web in their native language, being led to interesting English language sites will increase their confidence and help to overcome their aversion.

(3) It encourages online verbal exchange by use of comment buttons. At the bottom of each entry, any blog reader can make a comment that can be read and further commented on by all who access the site. Ask your students questions, give them riddles, challenge their views; whatever it takes to encourage them to comment.

(4) It provides class or syllabus information. Entries in the blog can also serve to remind students about homework assignments and upcoming discussion topics. Links can be provided to sites that introduce relevant topics of discussion. The tutor can also follow up on difficult areas of classroom work that might need review or clarification. In addition, a permanent link to the classroom syllabus and rules can be included on the blog.

(5) It serves as a resource of links for self-study. In the right and/or left margins of the blog, permanent links can be set-up and organized to aid the learner in self-study, for example links to online quizzes, English news sites, key-pal networks, audio and video files for listening practice and EFL interactive websites.

2.2 The Learner Blog

Learner weblogs are either run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners. In TEFL, learner blogs may be best suited for reading and writing classes. A common reading assignment can be followed by blog postings on the thoughts of each learner or group of learners. Furthermore, the act of constructing the blog may encourage the use of search engines and net surfing in English to find the appropriate sites to which links can be made. This will empower the learner to direct the reader to sites of choice for further reading. Individually, blogs can be used as journals for writing practice, or as free-form templates for personal

expression. The idea here is that students can get writing practice, develop a sense of ownership, and get experience with the practical, legal, and ethical issues of creating a hypertext document. In addition, whatever they write can instantly be read by anyone else and, due to the comment features of the software, further exchange of ideas is promoted. Tutors can even run a mega-blog of select topics of interest collected from student blogs so that the broader issues are brought into focus on a single website.

2.3 The Class Blog

This type of blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. The following are some possible uses:

(1) In conversation-based classes it could be used like a free-form bulletin board for learners to post messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. It could also be a space for them to post thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework.

(2) With intermediate and advanced learners, class blogs might also be useful for facilitating project-based language learning, where learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others.

(3) Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange. In this scenario, learners from different countries would have joint access and publishing rights to the blog. The entire exchange would then be transparent to all readers and could be followed and commented on by other learners, tutors, parents and friends.

3. Potential of a Blog: Positive vs. Negative

As a tool in the EFL classroom, the weblog is still new to most average teachers. Therefore a positive-negative analysis of its potential is helpful for us to make a sober assessment of its value as a teaching vehicle.

3.1 Positive Potential

When practiced in TEFL, blogs may show tremendous advantages both to EFL teachers and students.

3.1.1 On the part of the teacher blogs are a convenient teaching aid

For example, the amount of time students use their weblogs is at the discretion of the teacher. Students can use it once a semester to submit a paper, weekly for class assignments and notes, or anything in between. Computers in the classroom are not a prerequisite for the use of blogs. Thanks to the affordability of today's computers and high speed Internet access, most students have Internet access at home. Many universities have computer classrooms and computer areas for students to access now. All of the teacher's notes will be viewable together in chronological order. This is very convenient when preparing lessons that build upon previous material taught in the class. It is simple to edit class material if the text can be improved or if something new needs to be added. All student writing samples are kept in one place and can be read from any computer connected to the Internet at anytime. Teachers can give collective feedback to the class when a recurring mistake is found by adding entries to a "Writing Feedback" class blog. Additionally, individual feedback can be given to individual student blogs. In order to save time when giving feedback, save a copy of the messages at an additional teacher-only blog. If a class is taught for several years with different students, teachers might be able to recycle these messages. From this blog, the teacher can select the appropriate message to send to a student regarding their feedback to their homework and writing samples. (Johnson, 2004)

3.1.2 On the part of students, weblogs also serve as a valuable learning assistant

For instance, students have access to the teacher's complete notes on the Internet. Students have the option of previewing the class material before class and reviewing the material after class. Because students are connected to the Internet, they have access to online English dictionaries. Students can easily look up words they do not understand by cutting the unknown word and pasting it into an online dictionary. Because the class material is organized into sections, students can easily find information. Students can read comments for the class as a whole and comments directed at them individually. This maximizes feedback and contact with the teacher. Students can observe how their writing has changed over time. (Johnson, 2004)

3.2 Negative Potential

Like any other medium, the weblog has its shortcomings. As the weblog becomes more and more visible in academia, a great deal of worry and concern may be generated.

Firstly, it could be argued that the weblog may have a detrimental effect on student's EFL literacy development, particularly in terms of reading and writing. In *Weblogs and Discourse*, Wrede (2003) explains that just as weblog authors are not usually professional writers, weblog readers are not generally professional readers either. He warns that "this reading can't compensate for the weak writing skills of authors and potentially could be characterized as a kind of ...seeing what one wants to see, (selective perception)". It is likely that the reading skills developed from scrolling the computer screen lead to an accelerated but superficial, and often inaccurate understanding of the content. He also voices concerns about some of the disadvantages to writing skills that may be developed from activities such as blogging. There have been many cases of students using phrases like BTW (by the way) cuz (because) and U (you) in submitted written work and there was a well documented case of a student in Scotland who wrote her entire essay in SMS. (Hammersly, 2003)

Secondly, network etiquette may sometimes turn out to be a risky matter for students. Students who post their work and ideas in the public sphere may receive some criticism which could be unproductive, hurtful or even offensive. Students also need to take care to ensure that their own comments might not accidentally cause offence. For example, a student who posts, "Do you understand now?!!!" might be attempting to convey a supportive smile and a friendly laugh with the exclamations, but the reader might interpret these marks as an aggressive rebuke. Likewise with the use of capital letters, this is seen by many as a form of shouting. However, to the novice blogger who posts a blog in capital letters it might mean that they do not know about this particular form of network etiquette, or how to deactivate the "Caps Lock" button.

In addition, the language teacher using weblogs should also take security issues into account. Like websites, weblogs have the potential to be hacked, accidentally deleted or suddenly out of service when most needed. For this reason, hard drive backups and printouts of material posted to weblogs are essential. Furthermore, "Students should be apprised of the lack of anonymity on Blogger and of the need to use discretion in writing about sensitive, personal subjects" (Stiler, 2003, p9).

In short, even with its obvious shortcomings, blogs still have the potential to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide a teaching and learning platform where students enjoy a high level of autonomy and opportunity for greater interaction with peers and the teacher conducts his teaching with high efficiency.

4. Conclusion: Outlook of Blogs

The weblog is a new arrival as an educational technology, which is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it has

more advanced and convenient unique features and functions in comparison with other tools, but on the other hand it is less familiar with educators, a handicap for its application in educational activities. Fortunately, blogs are drawing more and more attention from EFL educators, though not originally intended for educational purposes. From the impact that the weblog has already had in the world of education, it might be argued that weblogs are not a fad but a glimpse of a brighter future. Today we seem to be stepping into an era in which “to blog or not to blog, that’s increasingly the question”.

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sociological values and so on. The purpose of Media Education is to build up students’ understanding about intermediary outputs, to train students’ attitudes towards intermediary information, to upgrade students’ abilities of judging information, to teach students learn how to use media properly and efficiently and take on information.

3.5 The Mutual Replenish of Media

On the campus, the traditional Medias, with newspaper and magazine as their symbols, have more superiority in the news and information field. Meanwhile, the direct medias have the obvious advantages in information exchanging in the campus market. What’s more, the network media is the leader of relaxation and entertainment.

The communication way of mobile phone, which can be used everywhere in anytime, make the superiority of satisfying the students’ various needs more conspicuous. In that case, in order to build harmonious campus culture, we should bring all the strong points of different kinds of campus medias into full plan, so that we can show the varieties and capacity of the campus culture.

References (omitted)

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