

10 Enhancing literacy and collaborative skills through blogging: the teenage language learner

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Abstract

Blogs are considered to have made an intervention in many English as a foreign language contexts. The architecture of the platform is thought to give authorship, a readership, and ownership of one's work, and encourage collaborative learning. The present chapter focusses on an exploratory research study which took place in a private language school setting in Greece. The study included 52 teenage learners who were introduced to Edublogs for the first time. The aim of the study was to (1) determine the frequency and form of peer feedback, (2) investigate the impact of blogs on students' collaborative skills, and (3) to investigate the progress made in students' literacy skills with the integration of blogs in the curriculum. Questionnaires were distributed to examine participants' impression of blogs and the effect it had on their learning.

Keywords: teenage language learners, blogs, teaching literacy skills, teaching collaborative skills.

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1. Introduction

Traditional research and theory have generally centred their focus on how language learners can successfully develop the foreign language (L2) within the language classroom. However, research in the digital age has deemed this approach and understanding of language learning as restricted; this would imply that there is a limited range of discourse and literacy practices. Nowadays, technology, the internet, the media, and social networks provide greater opportunities and affordances for meaningful and authentic L2 use than what has been known to occur in the language classroom (Richards, 2014). A growing range of digital tools can be applied to offer learning opportunities that are likely to be interactive, social, and multimodal. One of the tools that can facilitate language learning and teaching is a blog; an easily created and updateable platform, which allows users to publish their writing online instantly (Bella, 2005). Blogging has emerged as a popular form of online discourse. More specifically, blogs are thought to improve students' literacy skills and take their creativity to another level (Melin & Laun, 2007; Ward, 2004) on platforms where "writing practices afford the learners an expanded audience and increased literacy activities" (Gebhard, Shin, & Seger, 2011, cited in Aydin, 2014, p. 248). Palombo's (2011) exploratory and design-based descriptive study reveals that young students' blog experiences facilitated their writing process and improved their written products. The blog content is the sole responsibility of the author, and their objectivity of what to write to engage their readership is in their control. The blogging experience in language learning provides the potential for alternative expression and reflection, leading to deeper learning (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003). Researchers have described successful attempts of integrating the blogosphere in the language learning classroom for the purpose of improving L2 writing and developing an L2 community of writers (Downes, 2014). Yang (2009) has found that interaction via blogs entails a social element where students engage in discussions of mutual interests and individual differences. Members of such communities "tend to get more involved than they do in other pedagogic and web-based environments" (Yang, 2009, p.13). In addition, as Goodwin-Jones (2003) has claimed, blogs encourage peer feedback and the articulation of ideas and

opinions, they offer opportunities for collaborative projects and debates, and lead learners to engage in developing skills of convincing and argumentation. Evidently, the use of blogs encourages the revision of written materials, the giving and receiving of feedback, and increased participation in peer-review activities (Aydm, 2014, p. 250).

Even though blogs offer positive features of literacy and collaborative development in L2 learning, there is reluctance in using blogs with teenage learners for the purpose of improving writing skills (De Almeida Soares, 2008). The current chapter will present findings of the ‘Blog On’ project, a small-scale exploratory study conducted in a private language school setting in Greece. The study aims to contribute to the literature by presenting the impact blogs can have when integrated into the language learning curriculum.

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

The present exploratory study was triggered during an in-service teacher training programme the author had offered to private language school teachers in Southwestern Greece in 2015-2017. The in-service programme concentrated on educational technology and the integration of various digital tools in the language classroom. At the start of the programme, the language teachers were distributed an online survey which focussed on their students’ pedagogical needs. All trainees expressed their frustration regarding their students’ literacy skills and the fact that they had few resources to help their learners improve their writing. This frustration has been justified in the literature in a number of studies over the years. Writing is one of the most challenging skills to master in L2 learning. The skill itself is based on strategic use of the L2, which holds

“structural accuracy and communicative potential (Dar & Khan, 2015; Hyland, 2003). [...] Writing is a cognitive process that *tests* memory,

thinking ability, and linguistic command to successfully express ideas (Kellogg, 2001; Geiser & Studley, 2002)” (cited in Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016, p. 84, emphasis added).

In light of the teacher training survey outcomes, the present exploratory study was conducted in order to introduce language teachers to the blogosphere, in order to investigate its effect and study the development of the students’ literacy and collaborative skills via blogs. For the needs of the research, the teachers were introduced to the benefits of using blogs with their learners and how to effectively introduce them to blogs and maintain their students’ motivation to share blog entries throughout the academic year.

The present study focussed on 52 language learners aged 13-16, and the platform they used was Edublogs. The participating students were asked to write articles, essays (as requested for assessment purposes), and letters in their blogs as in-class activities. Then the students would provide feedback to their peers in the form of homework. None of the students had used blogs before, although they were all familiar with the concept. The research aims of the study were to:

- determine the frequency and form of peer feedback;
- investigate the impact of blogs on students’ collaborative skills; and
- investigate the progress made in students’ literacy skills with the integration of Blogs in the curriculum.

For the needs of the current exploratory study, data were gathered through a comparison of students’ blog work and past in-class and homework assignments. For the needs of the on-site work, students were provided with a laptop. Additionally, the development of the students’ collaborative skills was investigated by evaluating the form and frequency and quality of feedback students gave to their peers. Finally, questionnaires were distributed to examine participants’ impression of blogs and the effect they had on their learning. The

questionnaires were distributed at the end of the project. The data collection process lasted for 10 months.

2.2. Data analysis

ATLAS.ti 7 ©2013 (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin) was used to analyse and code the students' writings (past and blog writings). The analytical process, based on principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992), was iterative and abductive (Dörnyei, 2007), and the data analysis involved a number of readings of the data entries and progressive refining of emerging categories. The procedure was carried out as follows (based on Giannikas, 2013):

- an initial reading of the students' written work was conducted. This process allowed the author to become familiar with the quality of the writings;
- the texts were re-read and thoughts were annotated in the margin. The text was examined closely to facilitate a micro-analysis of data;
- peer feedback frequency and repetition was measured and calculated; and
- results were analysed and organised according to the participating students' levels.

Past writing assignments were compared to blog entries in order to measure L2 literacy development. The analysis of past writing assignments followed the same procedure. The questionnaires were distributed on a hard copy, which the students preferred. The questionnaire data were transferred on a spreadsheet and calculated on Excel, where tables and charts were developed based on the data.

2.3. Setting the scene

Before the data collection commenced, teachers were introduced with the blogosphere; the teachers were asked to set the scene for their students in order

to ease the students into their new writing tool. More specifically, they were asked to give the students a virtual tour of Edublogs and train them on how to use its features in-class.

Following the virtual presentation, the teachers were requested to assist students with the basic mechanics of the blogosphere, which would be to help set up an account and personalising it in terms of digital content. Students were also introduced to the concept of plagiarism. It was explained that students who plagiarised would immediately be asked to remove the post and repost a new one. Teachers were also asked to provide clear guidelines of (1) the tasks students would be asked to deliver via blogs (as mentioned above) and (2) how to give their peers constructive feedback.

The feedback guidelines were concerned with students' organising their feedback and language/phrases they would be expected to use. [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) show the guidelines provided to students in class.

Table 1. The dos and don'ts of planning our feedback

Dos	Don'ts
Explain what you noticed	Give your opinion
Show empathy and be kind	Hurt other writers' feelings
Help others reflect	Tell them what to do
Ask clear and inviting questions	Ask irrelevant questions
Praise the effort of others	Praise their ability

Table 2. A context for blog feedback

Sentence 1	Sentence 2	Sentence 3
I noticed that...	How might you...?	After reading your work, I realised that...
I observed that...	How could you...?	Now that I have seen your post, I think that...
I saw that...	What do you think...?	I used to think that, but now...
I realised that...	How did you decide to...?	Your writing has made me think...

At this early stage of the chapter it is important to mention that the participating students were initially reluctant to share their written work with their peers, in the fear of being negatively criticised. According to the questionnaire and feedback blog data, 60% of the students reported feeling exposed when they first published their work, whereas 40% of the participants did not attempt to share their first blog assignment. Out of the 60% of the students who posted their first assignment, only 10% gave their peers feedback and struck a discussion in the commentary (Giannikas, 2017).

The practitioners and the researcher experienced a standstill due to the students' attitude towards blogs, as the situation would not change for the first two weeks. This meant losing valuable time for L2 literacy development and data collection. In order to encourage the students to step out of their comfort zone and become more open to new learning possibilities, rewards were given to those who successfully completed a writing activity in a blog post. This worked positively resulting in 100% participation within four weeks of when the project commenced.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. L2 literacy development

Every week the students completed new blog posts that were later analysed. Within the first eight weeks, the students were recorded to improve their writing by 20% in comparison to their previous on-paper work. This was according to the teachers' feedback and assessment of their work. According to the students' feedback to each other on Edublogs, this occurred due to the fact that the online platform was more intriguing and prompted them to take notice of their own writing. Nonetheless, there were some setbacks in the students' writing in comparison to their past work. The data has been broken down in [Table 3](#) and resembles the overall percentages of the 52 participating students over the 10-month period.

Table 3. L2 literacy development via blogs

L2 Literacy Skills	Increase	Decrease	No change
Advanced Vocabulary	20%	0%	0%
Recurring Errors	0%	45%	0%
Structure/Word order	20%	0%	0%
Grammar	15%	0%	0%
False translation	5%	0%	0%
Spelling Errors	0%	30%	0%
Coherence	40%	0%	0%

As displayed in Table 3, there have been important changes in the students’ writing during the time of the study. According to the data, a 15-20% increase is seen in the use of advanced vocabulary, structure/word order, and grammar. Although the number may not be that high, this is an important development since there was no specific discussion or segment in the language lessons where the students would have been exposed to more grammar, vocabulary or structure than usual. This indicates that the students may have taken more time to compile their writing and also used the internet as a source of information and inspiration. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the coherence of the students’ writing (40%). Students were calculated to plan and organise their work better and use linking words more frequently. Based on the comparison of the past and present writing assignments, students were more efficient presenting their work accurately in their blog entries. The current development connects to the fact that the students had an audience. It was detected in the peer feedback that coherence was an issue, especially during the first three months of the project. Gradually, students/writers made an effort to be understood by their audience. Spelling and recurring errors were recorded to have a 30% and 40% decrease respectively. This is a noteworthy development as it allows ample room for improvement. Students were prompted to pay attention to their errors, correct them, and memorise the correct version of a particular linguistic phenomenon in order to improve their overall writing. Nonetheless, the participants were not accustomed to using laptops to complete writing assignments in the L2. This resulted to students making a number of typos (rare spelling mistakes, no space between words, not using capital letters when starting a sentence). Peer and teacher feedback encouraged proofreading before publishing a blog post. By

the end of the project, however, it was noted that these typos were sparsely seen. Nonetheless, this is a new issue that needs to be taken into consideration when investigating L2 writing assignments in the digital age.

3.2. Peer feedback via blogs

One of the most powerful elements of integrating blogs with the teenage learners was peer feedback. Due to the feedback and the fact that now the participants were writing for a wider audience, students were prompted to shift their mindset in order to write with a larger scope. This was beneficial for the student who received the feedback and for the students giving it. Even though the term *feedback* leads to the notion of assessment, for the needs of the present chapter, feedback will be referring to comments on learners' contributions that are not associated with formal grading, but to help writers improve their L2 literacy skills and for all students to engage in meaningful and pedagogical interaction.

Nonetheless, peer feedback was not a simple task for the students in the specific context. Students reported that, even though they were given guidelines, they did not know what to say in their comments and feared that negative feedback could bring out negativity outside and inside the language classroom. The feedback process took time, however, once students became engaged in the task, they developed a feeling of how to best approach their peers and what to say to help them, as seen in the following samples (copied from Edublogs):

“I really liked what you had to say about the pollution in our city, it is such a big problem. I agree that the government should help the people fix this problem, but how? What do you think? How can we help too?”
(Student 14).

“Your article is very good and I liked it very much. I think your English is very good and that your grammar is good also, but I think you could talk a bit more about your personal experience to make the article more interesting to the reader. Personally, I would like to know what YOU think” (Student 33).

“Your writing is very good and everything you say is very interesting. I think you have developed the topic very well. If I were to say something ‘negative’ is that you make grammar mistakes. If you manage to improve your grammar you will get an A in the exams!” (Student 6).

It was calculated that blog entries had two to seven comments, and in none of the comments or replies was there any conflict recorded. Despite the promised rewards and interaction among students, 17% of the participants never gave any feedback nor interacted during the course of the research. When the students were asked why they insisted in not participating in this part of the task, they responded that they had nothing to share and that feedback was best given by the teacher. The specific students never commented on their peers’ feedback to their work, and were the writers who had the fewest comments/peer feedback out of all the participants.

3.3. Questionnaire outcomes

The distribution of questionnaires was to assist the researcher in collecting data regarding the students’ experiences as blog users. Evidence was collected relating to students’ perceived benefits for learning and their opinions regarding the various writing tasks used in the project.

In Part A of the questionnaire, participants were asked about their prior experience with the use of computer-based applications, in particular blogs, their learning preferences, and their perceptions of the project after having been given an initial description. Part B of the questionnaire focussed on their general perceptions of blogs.

According to the data gathered, all students portrayed themselves as computer literate and used technology daily for private and educational purposes, although none of the participants had attempted to start a blog (whether in their L1 or L2). [Table 4](#) displays the outcomes of part A of the questionnaire distributed to students.

Table 4. The students' perspectives: Part A of the questionnaires

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	I don't know	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
I enjoyed working on Edublog	42%	33%	0%	8%	17%
I would continue to use blogs in the classroom	48%	20%	2%	13%	17%
I will continue to use blogs for personal use/sharing	27%	25%	18%	25%	5%
Blog writing helped me improve my written English skills	38%	52%	0%	2%	18%
Writing in blogs helped me improve my vocabulary	22%	45%	8%	5%	20%
Writing in blogs helped me improve my grammar	10%	32%	2%	18%	38%
I am a more confident writer now	44%	24%	0%	12%	20%
I prefer writing on blogs than on paper	30%	34%	2%	17%	17%
I benefited from the Blog project	45%	34%	0%	4%	17%

The vast majority of the participants believed that their language learning and writing skills developed through Blogging and their participation in the project. A high percentage of the students saw a difference in their writing as far as vocabulary (Strongly Agree: 22%; Agree: 45%) and grammar (Agree: 32%) were concerned. This implies that the students not only improved in these domains, but their involvement in their own work and the peer feedback they received helped them notice, not only their errors, but their progress as well. They became very aware of the language they were using and how they were using it. Another important development is that the students stated they preferred to write their assignments on blogs rather than using pen and paper (Strongly Agree: 30%; Agree: 34%). This could mean new writing opportunities for the students and new teaching approaches for the practitioners.

In Part B, students were given the opportunity to elaborate more on the use of blogging in their language learning, including the advantages and disadvantages of using Blogs. The disadvantages the students pinpointed were that they (30%)

were still reluctant to share their work with their peers and receive feedback from them. According to 22% of the respondents, they were not convinced that their feedback would be as useful as their teachers'. Furthermore, 25% of the students claimed that completing their written work on a piece of paper was more reliable than on Edublog, as they would not need to rely on their internet connection. Nonetheless, all students agreed that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. More specifically, 57% of the students had a very positive stance towards the use of blogs and the advantages they offer in their language learning. Here are some of the students' comments:

"I really think it did me a lot of good. I was very afraid to use it [Edublogs] at first, but now I don't mind if other people see my work. We are all students and we are learning so there is nothing to be afraid of" (Student 50).

"Blogging is a great and modern way to learn English and improve your writing. I am glad we started using them and I hope we continue because I have learned a lot during this time" (Student 28).

"Blogging is the new way to learn how to write. You can be creative and use different online resources that will give you ideas and help you develop a topic. You can add pictures, links, clips, which you cannot do on a piece of paper. I think my writing now has more colour" (Student 15).

"One of its [Edublogs] greatest advantage is that I can share my ideas with my classmates and I can keep up with their work. I know what everyone is doing and what they find difficult and I don't feel it's just me" (Student 51).

4. Conclusions

The present study displays the effects of integrating blogs as a virtual learning environment with teenage language learners. The participating students did not

have any previous blogging experience, which was why careful consideration was given to the methods of its integration. The results have shown that digital tools, such as blogs, can help today's language learners improve their literacy and collaborative skills in a motivating and efficient manner. Learners were recorded to step out of their comfort zone, take ownership of their work, and take risks writing in the L2, and share it with others.

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