Blogging to learn English: a report on two blog projects

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This paper reports on two blog projects conducted in Japan – one at a high school and the other at a university. It is intended for teachers who are interested in incorporating blogs into their classes but have not done so yet. Each project is described and observations are made. The projects are also compared and found to have similar outcomes. These outcomes were not entirely successful but are still enlightening and encouraging. In the end this paper seeks to persuade more teachers to use blogs in their classes.

　本稿で、日本の高校と大学の授業で使用された二つのブログを紹介する。ブログを用いた授業に興味ある教師、ブログに関して経験のない教師に何らかの示唆を与えられれば幸いである。まず、各プロジェクトの詳細を説明し、観察結果について言及する。また比較検討した結果、類似点が観察された。完全と言えるような研究結果としては、残された課題があるが、微力ながら何らかの貢献ができたのではないかと考える。今後、より多くの教師がブログを用いて授業することを推奨し、本稿を締めくくる。

This paper is based on a presentation we gave at the JALT 2007 national conference. In that presentation, we discussed Internet forums and blog communities. The purpose of the presentation was to demonstrate that Internet technology could be easily incorporated into English language classes in Japan. This paper will focus on, and expand, on the topic of blogs. We will describe blog projects we participated in, report some observations we made, make some comparisons between the projects and offer some conclusions.

Background

A blog is the online equivalent of a diary. What makes a blog attractive to many people is the ability to include photographs, music, video clips and website links. For educational purposes, there are three kinds of blogs: teacher, student, and class blogs. A teacher blog is written by the teacher to communicate with the students outside of the classroom. Many teacher blogs are administrative in nature and inform students about the class. For example, the syllabus, handouts, supplementary materials and audio files are often made available for students to download. Although students are usually allowed to post comments, the communication tends to be one-way. The second kind of blog is a student blog, a blog that is written by the student. The entries in these blogs are either assigned writings or free entries. The third kind of blog is a class blog where the students collaboratively write the blog entries.

EFL teachers and researchers have found a variety of benefits from incorporating blogs into their classes. Mynard (2007) citing (Brooks, Nichols and Priebe, 2004) and (Pinkman, 2005) states that blogs, "provide authentic writing practice, and an opportunity to recycle language learned in class, and an alternative way of communicating with teachers and peers" (p. 1). Similarly, Wang, Fix and Bock (2004) state that blogs can, "become a vehicle through which learners can express their ideas in a state of virtual proximity, creating and refining their ideas through dialogue with other learners and guidance by the teacher" (p. 7). Blogs may also promote learner autonomy and independence because learners are free to choose their own materials and work at their own pace (Blin 1999, cited in Pinkman 2005, p.14). Furthermore, Fellner and Apple (2006) found that students' writing fluency improved through daily blogging.

A high school blog project

In January 2006, Stout participated in a blog project at a private co-educational high school in Tokyo. The school was a Super English Language High School (SELHi) at the time. The students who participated in this project were first and second year students in a special programme called the University Overseas Study Abroad Course. Students on this course were students who expressed a desire to attend university overseas. This desire was the only criteria for entering the programme. Consequently, the classes were not homogenous. For example, the mean TOEFL CBT score for the second year class (K2) was 106.2. The high was 210 and the low was 57. The average score on the essay section was 2.7. Unfortunately, standardised test score data are unavailable for the first year class (K1). Nevertheless, this class was similarly heterogeneous. It included returnees, and Asian students with weak proficiency in both Japanese and English, along with average Japanese students. First year students received seven hours of instruction from a native English-speaking teacher (NET). Second year students received nine hours of instruction from a NET. The programme included a special computer studies class along with oral, reading and writing classes. The computer studies class was held once a week. The students also took an Information Technology (IT) class from a Japanese teacher. Despite this some students reported that they did not feel comfortable using computers. Furthermore, NETs had no contact with the IT teacher.

The NETs participating in the Study Abroad Course decided to introduce the students to blogs for the following reasons: blogging would give the students an opportunity to consolidate and practice skills they were learning in their reading, writing and computer studies classes; it would allow students to communicate in English with their classmates outside of class hours; it would allow the students to "play" using English; and the blogs could serve as an archive of each student's writing, which would be useful for mapping progress.

Students began making their blogs in the computer studies class. They made their blogs using Blogger (http://www.blogger.com). Blogger was chosen because it is free and relatively easy to use. Due to limited classroom time, the students were required to finish their blogs as homework. They were also required to do the following tasks:

1. Post a comment on the computer studies teacher's blog (this provided everyone with a link to the students' blogs)

2. Post seven blog entries (one per day) that included images and links, No word limit was set.

3. Post at least one comment on seven other blogs

The students were given a week to complete the homework. They were assessed on the lesson and the homework only. The assessment criteria were based on compliance only. Students were encouraged to maintain their blogs but they were not required to do so.

There were a number of challenges that had to be overcome during the project. First, due to the school administration's concerns regarding privacy and safety, the students were given strict guidelines. Students published under aliases, they were warned not to publish any personal information in their profiles, in blog entries or in comments. Some students did not follow the guidelines and the NETs had to give these students extra help. Despite these efforts one student received comments from bloggers who were not classmates. This precipitated the exchange below:

> Blogger +: thanks, yur blog is interesting too. wher r u from?

> Love Marie:

> Thank U.

> I can not say my personal profile…. my teacher said do not to tell your information to other people…. So sorry I can not tell where am I from. But in this blog you can guess from my pictures.

> Happy to talk with you.

> And Nice 2 meet U!

> Blogger +:

> oh! well, thats okay, i'm 12 and live in Kentucky of the US. My real name is yvonne, (e-von) Williams. I love ballet and writting stories.

> Blogger Cherrys:

> yvonne shamey shamey giving out you personal

info online well bye this is .... hannah da da da da....click... "Im gone")

A number of things are interesting about this exchange. First, the Japanese student showed a great deal of maturity when responding to the comments, and second, she received confirmation of her teachers' warnings from a near peer.

An overall analysis of the blogs revealed that the project was moderately successful. While none of the students were able to complete all the tasks within a week, all but six students (three per class) eventually managed to create a blog and post at least one entry. The blog entry below suggests that students may not have thought it possible to complete the tasks as set:

> Lili Marleen:
>
> This is the first post of my blog.
>
> But this is not my first blog.
>
> I want to post everyday of week, but I think it is very hard to continue.
>
> You know, to write the diary everyday is hard. BLOG is same as that.
>
> Hoooah, please wish I can post every day! Ha Ha Ha :)

Clearly the teachers and the students had very different ideas of what was a reasonable time frame. Another interesting outcome was this: three of the students, one in K1 and two in K2 published their blogs almost entirely in Japanese. However, interestingly, most of the comments on these blogs were in English.

K1 students published a total of 187 blog entries, an average of 8.5 entries per student. The highest number of blog entries was 47 and the lowest was 1. A total of 327 comments were posted, an average of 15 comments per blog. Most of the students published entries over a 3-month period. However, three students maintained their blogs for a year or more. One student is still blogging.

K2 students published a total of 157 entries, an average of 7 entries per student. The highest number of blog entries was 22 and the lowest was 1. A total of 212 comments were posted, an average of 10 comments per blog. The highest number of comments was 34 and the lowest was zero. Half the class maintained their blogs for less than two months. However, again, two students maintained their blogs for a year. Recently, both of these students have begun posting on their blogs again.

A university blog project

Murray wanted to use blogs at a technical university in Tokyo in order to provide an environment where his students could practice reading and writing outside the classroom. Instead of using Blogger, he decided to setup a blog community. A blog community is simply a website hosting a number of blogs written by individuals who write about similar themes. In the case of a learning community, the members are classmates. He hoped that the interactive nature of blog communities would encourage the students to communicate with classmates and students from other classes. Originally, he wanted to use WordPress MU, the multi-user version of WordPress (http://wordpress.org) but his webhost did not support virtual domains and as a

result was unable to host a WordPress MU community. Therefore, he looked for an alternative blog community platform. He found 21Publish (http://www.21publish.com), a free blog community hosting website designed for businesses and online communities. Using this website, he founded two blog communities in the first semester of the 2007-2008 academic year for four first-year English classes. The average TOEIC score of these students was 317. Each community consisted of two classes. The Level 2 community (http://tdu2.21publish.com) had 97 members and the Level 3 community (http://tdu3.21publish.com) had 88 members. Due to limited classroom hours and the assumption that technical students are comfortable using computers and the Internet, the CALL classroom was not used. Instead, a handout explaining the nature of the assignment and the blog community website was given at the beginning of the semester. The assignment required the students to write at least 10 weekly blog entries during the semester. The entries could be on any topic and of any length. However, the students were encouraged to write at least 50 words. In addition, the students were required to write 20 comments to their classmates' entries. Finally, Murray emphasized that the purpose of the assignment was to communicate and that grammar and spelling mistakes were acceptable. Machine translations were not permitted. This assignment accounted for 10% of their final grade.

This project was moderately successful for several reasons. A few students had difficulty with the English-only website and needed assistance. One student commented, "It's difficult for me to use TDU blog". This could have been avoided by using a CALL classroom for the orientation session. Also, most students did not fulfil the project requirements. Students commented "English blog is difficult for me!! Please reduce the blog's quantity!!", "I am busy so I don't write the blog" and "Blogs use many time, so it's bad work". By increasing the value of the project or by reducing the project requirements, perhaps students would see the assignment more favourably.

The most positive result of the project was that meaningful communication resulted between the author and the readers. A sample blog entry and reader comments are below:

Writer 1:

Volleyball

I watched volleyball game on TV.

A Japan were playing a Bulgaria.

It was very exciting game.

The result of this game a Bulgaria won.

I want to a Japan win next game.

Reader A:

Male volleyball is interesting.

Reader B:

Me too! Hold out Japan!!

Reader C:

I don't like the volleyball program, because my favorite program is collapse.

Even though there are grammatical mistakes, a dialogue resulted between the author and their readers. It is interesting that the first two readers agreed with the writer but the third did not.

Concerning student output, the Level 3 members wrote 573 blog entries – an average of 6.5 entries. Several students wrote more than the required 10 entries, but several opted out and wrote none. The Level 3 members posted 857 comments – an average of 9.77 comments per student. The Level 2 members wrote a total of 492 entries with an average of 5.07 entries per student. They posted 1171 comments – an average of 12.07 comments per student. One student commented on the importance of comments, "I like blogs but sometimes forget to write comments".

Comparison of projects

Unfortunately, the majority of the students in both projects did not fulfil the task requirements. One possible explanation is that students felt that the assignments were too time-consuming and not worth the effort considering the small reward in their final grade. Another explanation is that the students did not perceive the value of blogs as a tool for autonomous learning. On the contrary, some viewed it as homework. The lack of learner independence shown by the students involved in the two blogging projects reported here supports the findings of Pinkman (2005) and we agree that "further research needs to be done on assessing the attitudes of students in Japan toward learning independence and out-of-class learning" (p. 19), including the attitudes of high school students.

Conclusion

While these projects suffered from some of the same problems noted in the literature, some beneficial outcomes were observed. We are encouraged by this and perhaps by assigning more classroom time for blogs and doing more to make the learning outcomes clearer to the students, we may see better results in future projects.

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