

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Student perceptions on the use of blogs in a writing course

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Reference data:

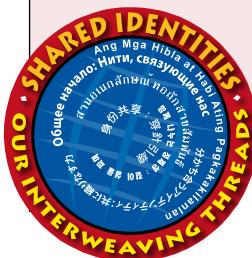
Murray, Adam (2009). Student perceptions on the use of blogs in a writing course. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper reports on university students' perceptions of blogs as a tool for practicing and learning a foreign language, as well as their teacher's observations. The paper describes how the author used blogs in an EFL classroom and assessed students' opinions of blogs and their reactions to a blogging project. Although the results were mixed, the author reflects on how blogs may be useful teaching tools and offers suggestions for educators interested in using this technology with their students.

本稿では外国語学習及び練習のツールとして利用したブログに対する大学生の認識を報告する。加えて、担当教員の所見を述べる。多様な結果が出たが、ブログは教員にとって有益な手段となり得る。

In the past few years, blogs have become commonplace worldwide and educators are beginning to see blogs as useful tools for education. In addition, researchers have reported how computer-assisted learning can be motivating for learners. Citing numerous studies, Warschauer (1996, p. 2) identified four motivating aspects of computer-assisted learning: novelty, the individualized nature of such learning, learner control, and non-judgmental feedback. However, the majority of the studies cited focused on general learning, not on language learning in particular.

Warschauer's large-scale, international study focused on language learning specifically. He found that three factors motivate language students. The first factor was *communication*. Some of the motivating aspects of communication include "feeling part of a community, developing thoughts and ideas, learning about different people and cultures, and students' learning from each other" (1996, p. 9). The second factor was *learner empowerment*. Learners are empowered when feelings of isolation are minimized and it



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becomes easier to make contact with others. The third factor was *learning*. The learners felt that computers could help them study more efficiently and helped them become more independent learners by giving them “more control of their learning and more opportunities to practice English” (1996, p. 9). As Warschauer’s study was conducted more than ten years ago, another motivating factor may be involved. At that time, many academic institutions had limited computer resources for students outside of technology programs. For that reason, language students may have been particularly impressed with computer-assisted language learning and, as a result, had formed very positive attitudes toward the use of computers. The newness of learning language through computer technology (i.e., the *wow factor*) may have been another strong motivator for the students in Warschauer’s study.

More recently, Chartrand (2008) reported that Japanese high school and university students enjoyed learning with computers and that they perceived computers as an effective way to study English. In regard to blogs specifically, Pinkman (2005) suggested that blogs increased Japanese university students’ interest and motivation to use English. Pinkman’s research identified the following learner-perceived advantages of blogs: interacting with other learners, improved writing skills and learning and using new vocabulary.

Additional benefits of using blogs in foreign language classrooms were reported by Fellner and Apple (2006) who found that students’ writing fluency improved through writing daily blog entries. Rezaee and Oladi (2008) found that blogs were more effective in improving writing than

traditional writing tasks, and that they improved social interaction skills. Also, Iida (2009) concluded that blogs can help learners improve their language skills and help them become more autonomous learners.

Taking the above findings into account, I wanted to investigate the use of blogs in a writing course by conducting a small-scale pilot study. In particular, I wanted to understand my students’ perceptions of blogs by answering the following questions:

What did they think about blogs in general?

What did they think about using blogs for communication?

Did they see blogs as a useful tool for learning?

In examining these questions, I hoped to reach a clearer understanding of my students and how computer-related tasks motivate them.

Method

Blogs were used as a mandatory element of a compulsory writing class for second-year university students. Twenty-three students took part in the study, none of whom were English majors. The blog component accounted for 20% of the students’ final grades, and required the students to (1) write weekly entries to their personal blogs, (2) read the blogs of their classmates, and (3) write at least two comments to their classmates. The purpose of the blogs was for communication practice, rather than grammar practice. With the exception of the first blog entry, a brief self-introduction, the students were free to write about any topics

they wished. It was emphasized that machine translations were not permitted. The students were encouraged to practice using their English without being overly concerned about mistakes.

At the beginning of the semester, a blog community was setup on www.21publish.com – a free blog community hosting system. One of the advantages of blog communities over independent blogs is improved interaction between writers and readers (Murray, 2007). Thus, the use of such a community could help to reduce feelings of isolation, potentially de-motivating influences (Warschauer, 1996).

In the first class, the instructor showed an existing EFL blog community and explained the purpose of the blog component of the course to the students. The students then registered their personal blogs and wrote their first blog entries – self-introductions. Throughout the semester, some classroom time was allocated to blogs, but the majority of the work was to be done as homework.

In order to understand the perceptions of students, a survey was administered at the end of the semester. The anonymous survey consisted of 20 statements, each of which was evaluated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The statements and their mean scores are presented in Appendix 1.

Results and discussion

Tables 1 to 3 organize the survey items into three broad categories: “ease of use,” “blogs for communication,” and “blogs as a learning tool.” Table 1 shows the students’ perception of blogs in terms of ease of use. Most Japanese

university students own cellular phones and are very proficient at using them to write email and use the Internet. However, the students thought that it was difficult writing blogs at the outset of the project (Table 1, Item 1; $M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.46$). Perhaps the students were not familiar with blogs and needed more orientation at the beginning of the project. Also, the blog website had no Japanese language support. As the semester progressed, the students became familiar with the English-only environment and became comfortable with the system. They reported that posting blog entries was relatively easy (Table 1, Item 2; $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.33$) and that they had become at least somewhat comfortable reading and writing blogs (Table 1, Item 3; $M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.24$). This survey was administered at the end of the semester so it is impossible to know precisely when students became comfortable using the system. Further research is needed to accurately measure how this learning process occurs, but it seems safe to conclude that the learning process could be made easier by spending more time on orientation and providing Japanese support via handouts or online help screens.

Table 1. Ease of use (n=21)

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1. At first, it was difficult writing my blog.	4.09	1.33
2. Posting messages to my blog is easy.	2.95	1.28
3. I am comfortable reading and writing blogs.	2.86	1.24

A positive aspect of the project for the students was communication. Table 2 shows their perceptions of blogs as a communication tool. The students were quite interested in reading their classmates' blogs (Table 2, Item 1; $M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.24$). The content of individual blogs differed between students due to the fact that they were able to write about any topics of interest. In addition, they were able to incorporate multimedia such as photographs and videos, and they had the opportunity to interact with each other and their teacher outside the writing classroom by writing responses to blog entries. It is also interesting to note that students were able to customize the appearance of their blogs by selecting colors, fonts and images. Possibly as a result of being able to personalize their blogs, students perceived blogs as a way to express themselves (Table 2, Item 2; $M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.05$).

All of these aspects of the blog project were intended to enhance communication, yet students did not see blogs as being very interactive (Table 2, Item 3; $M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.85$). Perhaps students were making a comparison between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication. With face-to-face communication, feedback

Table 2. Blogs for communication (n=21)

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I am interested in reading other blogs.	2.86	1.24
2. I see blogs as a way to express myself.	2.71	1.05
3. Blogs are interactive.	2.33	0.85
4. Blogs have increased meaningful interaction with my classmates.	2.19	0.97

between participants is instantaneous. However there is a delay with computer-mediated communication. Although both forms of communication are necessarily interactive, these delays may make computer-mediated communication seem somehow less interactive to learners. More research needs to be done to understand exactly how students feel about computer-mediated communication. Do they consider blogs to be positive in that they facilitate communication? Or do they see the inherent delays in interacting through blogs as somehow distracting?

The students also felt that the project did not generate meaningful communication with their classmates (Table 2, Item 4; $M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.97$). This is likely a result of the content of the blog entries. The majority of the entries was based on their daily routines (i.e., last weekend, hobbies, etc.) and did not deal with controversial topics. If the students were required to write about common topics, more meaningful interactions may have occurred between the writers and readers.

Table 3 describes the students' opinions of blogs as learning tools. The students felt that they had learned something during the project (Table 3, Item 1; $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.04$). However, this survey made no attempt to assess what they had learned. Naturally, they learned how to use this blog system and may have acquired some Internet-related vocabulary. Also, it is likely that they learned general information by reading the blogs and comments of their classmates. Encouragingly, some students felt that the project would be beneficial for future writing classes (Table 3, Item 2; $M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.24$).

Table 3. Blogs as a learning tool (n=21)

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Because of the assignment, I learned something new.	2.90	1.04
2. You should keep the blog assignment for future classes.	2.62	1.24

Conclusion

Although prior research has shown that using computers in the language classroom can help motivate students, the current study, on the whole, did not support these findings. Communication had been reported as an important motivating factor in prior research. Yet despite my students enjoying reading others' blogs, they did not feel that the project promoted meaningful communication. On the other hand, it is possible that my students felt a sense of empowerment by the fact that they saw their blogs as a way to express themselves. Taking these inconclusive findings into account, it is clear that further research needs to be conducted to reach a better understanding of students' perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of blogs. The perceived advantages of blogs as tools for reading and writing development also need to be explored with in-depth surveys and interviews. However, it is safe to say that EFL students can use blogs for communication and self-expression and that in order for blogs to be effectively used in the language classroom, the teacher needs to provide adequate class time and support in terms of both assistance and materials.

Adam Murray teaches at Tokai University, Shimizu campus. His research interests are productive vocabulary, project work, and computer-assisted language learning.

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Appendix 1

Survey statements and mean scores

1. I like blogs.
(2.48)
2. I am interested in reading other people's blogs.
(2.71)
3. I believe blogs are interactive.
(2.33)
4. At first, creating and posting to a blog was difficult.
(4.09)
5. Posting messages to blogs is easy.
(2.95)
6. I think that it is not difficult to create a blog.
(2.19)
7. After the first blog, I felt more comfortable with posting and reading blogs.
(2.86)
8. I see blogs as a way to express myself.
(2.71)
9. I believe blogs increased the level of meaningful interaction between students.
(2.62)
10. Because of the blog assignment, I learned something new.
(2.90)

11. Posting to my blog and reading 2 other classmates' blogs per week is fair.
(2.14)
12. A blog assignment is valuable.
(2.52)
13. The blog assignment has increased my learning.
(2.19)
14. Reading other classmates' blogs was educational.
(2.67)
15. The blog assignment was academically valuable to me.
(2.81)
16. Blogs are a credible source of information.
(1.86)
17. I would have written my blog and comments even if it was not part of my grade.
(2.09)
18. You should keep the blog assignment for future classes.
(2.62)
19. I realize the usefulness of blogs, I will use them in the future.
(2.28)
20. I will use blogs in my academic research in the future.
(2.00)