（Note）

Blogging As A Form of Homework:
Teacher and Student Perspectives

Louise Ohashi

Keywords

blog　　blogging　　CALL　　e-learning

Introduction

In this digital age English teachers and students have access to more language resources than ever before. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has become increasingly popular in recent years, with the use of multi-roms, online language learning sites, social networking services (such as Facebook and MySpace) and blogs (also known as weblogs) steadily growing. Supporters point to the potential benefits, such as increased learner motivation, autonomy, and skill development (such as word processing and IT skills). They also praise blogs and social network services for creating opportunities to use English in a real life way outside of the classroom. Others, however, point out that there is little time to teach students how to use these new technologies or properly monitor them and believe the benefits are too few to justify the 'work'. With this in mind, a simple blogging project was conducted with 5 English classes. This paper gives an overview of the implementation of the blog project, with comments on the level of input and monitoring required by the teacher-researcher, and presents data that evaluates the project from the students' perspective.

Using Blogs to Learn English

Blogs, or weblogs, are interactive online diaries, or more commonly these days, information sharing sites. They are usually maintained by individual users, who are the only ones that can add posts, but are interactive in that readers may leave comments, either anonymously or openly. Due to these communicative aspects, blogs have found their way into language classrooms. Campbell (2003) suggests three main classroom blog types; tutor blogs, which are run by the teacher, learner blogs, which are run by individuals or small groups of students, and class blogs, which are contributed to by entire classes. Students can use blogs to record public journals, submit and share assignments, collaborate on writing tasks and interact with others in online communities (both within their educational setting and beyond) while teachers can use them to create and store online

1

オオハシ　ルイーズ：淑徳大学　国際コミュニケーション学部　兼任講師

supplementary materials, post class notes for student review, and give feedback, either to the whole group or individually (Barrios, 2003; Johnston, 2004; Goodwin-Jones, 2003; Jones, 2006).

Research shows that blogs can benefit students in many ways. A study by Oladi and Rezaee (2008) found that blogging promoted creative writing and provided a meaningful medium for improving students' social interaction. Jones's (2006) in depth study found that blogging created a discourse community, facilitated critical thinking skills, provided a platform for self-expression, motivated students to write and, from a practical perspective, helped them to develop their word processing skills. In addition, as noted by Seitzinger (2006, p.7) blogs "can facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge". Furthermore, blogs put students in a community of learners, give them the opportunity for situated writing practice, provide them with an authentic, real-life way to use English and give them the opportunity to develop new IT skills. These opportunities address students' needs on many levels, situating blogging comfortably within the New London Group's Multiliteracies Approach to learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

There are a number of studies that evaluate blogs as a pedagogical tool but as this is a relatively new area more are needed, particularly in the EFL/ESL context, in order to properly assess their value. This action research project was conducted with five classes at two universities in Japan, with the hope of gaining some insight into the manageability of blogs as a learning tool from the teacher's perspective, and, in more detail, to find out how students felt about blogging. This paper reports on the first phase of a two-phase project, focusing on the time commitment needed to introduce and monitor the students' blogs and exploring the students' initial feelings about blogging and their experiences with the technical side. The second phase will focus on students' perceptions of the impact blogs had on their English skills. It will look in detail at how they believe it impacted upon their reading, writing and communication skills, as well as their confidence levels; areas that the majority of students in a study by Abu Bakar, Latif and Ya'acob (2010) rated positively.

Methodology

The main goal of this research project was to ascertain a) whether or not blogs, which would be mainly used outside of class, could be set up and integrated into the existing syllabus without taking up too much valuable class time or placing an unreasonable burden on the facilitator (the teacher-researcher) outside of class and b) whether or not students could learn how to use this technology easily and liked using it to further their English development. The first goal will be evaluated with regards to notes made by the teacher-researcher, while the second will be evaluated with reference to a questionnaire that was administered at the conclusion of the first phase.

Participants

The study was conducted with English Communication students in five classes at two universities. The majority of the students were Japanese and all were enrolled in first and second year subjects. Most of the students were 18-20 years old, but there were several slightly older students. The class sizes ranged from 10 to 39 students, with male to female ratios varying by class,

but the majority of classes were fairly evenly divided, with only the largest class male-dominated. The classes were chosen as a convenience sample, with the teacher-researcher choosing all of the communication classes she taught for inclusion in the project. All students in the five classes were required to participate in the blogging classes and add to the blogs for homework. At the end of the semester all students were invited to complete the questionnaire anonymously, with assurance that it had no bearing on their grades.

Instruments

There were two basic instruments used in this project. To address the first research goal, the teacher-researcher took notes throughout the project. For the second goal, a basic questionnaire was used. The final version of the questionnaire had two main parts, with one focusing on the students' feelings about blogging and the other focusing on their level of ease in using this tool. A third section checked whether students had blogged in English prior to the project and a fourth allowed students to write open comments.

Section 1 had only one question, which required a yes/no answer in relation to prior experience with blogs in English. In section 2 a 4-point Likert Scale was employed to find out the students' feelings about reading and writing blog posts and comments and their views of the blog as a whole. The blog's usefulness as homework and a study tool was also evaluated. Section 3 also employed a 4-point Likert Scale, asking students to rate the difficulty of _learning_ to make posts, write comments and add photographs and links and assess the difficulty of _actually_ writing posts, reading others' posts and writing comments. This section also checked how difficult students found it to of think of a topic and use the blog at the end of the project. Section 4 invited open comments from students in either English or Japanese.

Setting Up and Implementing the Blogs
Step One: Setting Up the Blogs and Schedule

There are many free blogging sites available but the teacher-researcher had experience using Blogger (www.blogger.com) so chose this platform for its familiarity. Two accounts were set up, one for each university, and within each account one blog was set up for each group of 5 to 7 students within the 5 classes. A Gmail email account (www.gmail.com) was needed to set up the Blogger accounts. To keep the two universities' blogs separate, different email accounts and Blogger accounts were set up, following the step-by-step instructions on the Gmail and Blogger websites. A total of 15 blogs were made for the students to use, with blog titles listed alphabetically from Group A to Group I at one university and Group A to Group F at the other. Next, a worksheet that could be referred to during and after the initial blogging lesson and a blogging schedule were produced. Finally, a checklist template that would allow the teacher-researcher to record each student's contributions was made.

3

Step Two: Dividing the Groups

The students were divided into groups randomly by drawing names from a box and each

student was given a member number within their group, which they needed in order to know when to make their posts and comments. Students' names were added to the checklist.

Step Three: Blogging Lesson

Blogging was introduced to each class in a 90-minute lesson. Students were shown some blogs made by past students and given instructions on how to upload posts, add photographs, link web-pages and add comments. The teacher-researcher demonstrated how to do each step with the use of a dummy account (Group J) on a computer linked to a projector screen. Students made their first entry as a group in the class, adding a group photograph that was taken in the lesson or watching as the teacher-researcher added it. They also began their own posts and read others' entries and made comments if there was time. Students who didn't have time to complete all of the tasks above did them for homework.

Step Four: Monitoring

Everyone was required to upload a post with pictures or a link in the first week and make comments about the other posts in their group. After that, each week some members in each group made posts and the others read the posts and made comments, following the schedule. The teacher-researcher used a checklist to record students' contributions and referred to it in class to praise those who had added to the blogs, encourage those who hadn't and help students if they had faced technological problems.

Step Five: Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered in the last class of the semester. In order to ensure all of the students understood completely, the questions were written in English and Japanese, with comments encouraged in whichever language the students preferred.

Step Six: Evaluating Results

The results were tabulated for each class and university then for the entire sample. Although results did vary and the reasons for this would be useful to analyze, the scope of this report is limited so only the results for the entire sample will be presented. Of the 89 students who participated in the project, there were 85 students present on the days that the questionnaires were administered. Unfortunately, two students failed to complete the second side of the questionnaire, so there are 85 participants for sections 1 and 2 but only 83 for section 3. There were comments from 42 students in section 4. The results have been tabulated below with figures for positive and negative responses tallied and converted to percentages for ease of comparison.

4

RESULTS

This section gives an overview of the results of the project. The first section focuses on the notes made by the teacher-researcher and the second focuses on the questionnaire.

The two key concerns that the teacher-researcher had before embarking on this project were a)

how much class time would be needed and b) how much of the teacher-researcher's private time it would take to set up and monitor the blogs. The results are as follows.

In terms of project preparation, several hours were needed. It took a little over two hours to set up the Gmail accounts, Blogger accounts, the 16 blogs and the class checklists and a further two hours to create the worksheets and tweak the blogging schedules, which had been created by a colleague. Once the blogs had been introduced, they needed to be monitored. Every week the teacher-researcher had two days (one for each teaching day at the two universities) that the blogs and comments needed to be checked. Each blog post and comment was read and the writers were recorded on the checklist. As the students were required to include a link or photograph with each post, a note was also made as to whether this requirement had been fulfilled. Although not entirely necessary, the teacher-researcher also added comments to some of the blog posts. This was done with the hope that it would encourage students. It took approximately 10 to 15 minutes per blog to read and record the students' contributions when all students were required to write posts and comment (the first week) and 6 to 8 minutes per blog when only scheduled members were required to add posts and comment. Four of the classes only had two or three groups per class, so monitoring generally only took 12 to 20 minutes per week for those classes once the project was underway. The largest class had 6 groups so it took longer, generally 25 to 30 minutes, to monitor this class's blogs.

In terms of class time, the 90-minute introductory class was found to be sufficient to equip students with the skills they needed to contribute to the blogs. As for monitoring in class, approximately 5 minutes was needed every lesson. This time was used for students to exchange information about the blogs and for the teacher to praise those who had contributed and encourage those who hadn't. In instances that students required assistance an extra few minutes was used to for explanations. Problems generally only arose in the first two classes, and it was mainly related to forgetting to add names to comments or blog posts so wanting to know how to go back and edit.

Moving now to the questionnaire, the results for the entire sample are as follows.

Section 1

79 out of 85 students (93%) had never written a blog in English before it was introduced in this project. Furthermore, comments indicated that for at least a percentage of the class, writing a blog in any language was a new experience.

5

Section 2

The blogs were well-accepted, with the majority of students indicating that they liked the blogs (91%), liked reading them (91%) and liked writing them (68%). They also liked writing comments (75%) and reading other students' comments (92%). In addition, they found the blogs helpful, with 74% finding them useful as homework, 76% believing the blogs helped them study English and 71% indicating the blogs helped them to become closer to their classmates.

Feelings About Blogging n=85	SA	A	D	S	SA/A	D/SD
I like the class blogs	31	46	8	0	91%	9%
I think the blogs are boring	2	7	47	29	29%	71%
I like making blog entries	17	41	22	5	68%	32%
I don't want to make blog entries	4	11	49	21	18%	82%
I like reading the blogs	45	32	8	0	91%	9%
I don't want to read the blogs	1	4	43	37	6%	94%
I like writing comments	21	43	21	0	75%	25%
I don't want to write comments	1	10	47	27	13%	87%
I like reading other students' comments	39	39	7	0	92%	8%
I think the blog was useful as homework	23	40	21	1	74%	26%
The blogs helped me study English	27	38	18	2	76%	24%
I think the blogs are a waste of time	1	8	42	34	11%	89%
The blogs helped me become closer to my classmates.	13	47	23	2	71%	29%

Strongly Agree (SA) Agree (A) Disagree (D) Strongly Disagree (SD)

Section 3

Generally the students found blogging technology easy to pick up, with 78% indicating it was very easy/easy to learn how to make entries, 86% finding it very easy/easy to add photographs, 75% finding it very easy/easy to add links and 87% finding it very easy/easy to add comments. In terms of the non-technological side, students faced more difficulties. While 72% found it very easy/easy to write comments and 87% found it very easy/easy to read the blogs, only 37% found it very easy/ easy to write their blog posts. This may stem from the fact that 39% of the students found it difficult or even very difficult to think of a blog topic. Despite these obstacles, 82% of students indicated that it was very easy or easy to use the blog at the end of the semester.

Task Difficulty Assessment n=83	VE	E	D	VD	VE/E	D/VD
How easy was it to learn how to make entries?	15	50	17	1	78%	22%
How easy is it to write your blog entries?	5	26	46	6	37%	63%
How easy was it to learn how to add photographs?	18	53	11	1	86%	14%
How easy was it to learn how to add links?	14	48	20	1	75%	25%
How easy was it to learn how to write comments?	20	52	10	1	87%	13%
How easy is it to write comments on your group members' blogs?	19	41	21	2	72%	28%
How easy is it to think of a blog topic?	8	24	45	6	61%	39%
How easy is it to read your group members' blogs?	26	46	10	1	87%	13%
Overall, how easy is it for you to use the blog now?	16	52	12	3	82%	18%

Very Easy (VE) Easy (E) Difficult (D) Very Difficult (VD)

Section 4

All students were encouraged to write comments and 42 chose to do so. Written feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with 90% of the comments either solely positive or positive but pointing out an area of difficulty. Some examples of solely positive comments include:

6

・ *It's rare to have the chance to try to use English for a regular daily life task so it was really fun. I think I've been able to brush up my English skills by taking this class (translated from Japanese).*

・ *I think writing the blogs in English was a really good experience. I want to try to keep on blogging (translated from Japanese).*

・ *The blogs helped me study English, I think so much.*

・ *I like writing blog and watching blog. The blogs help me study English. I like reading other student's blogs.*

Examples of mainly positive comments include:

・ *The most difficult thing was to think of a blog topic for me. If I had experienced nothing that day, I can't write interesting blog topics. But it was interesting for me to write and read blog topics!!*

・ *It was a little hard for me to write my blog and opinions. But this class is very fun! So I'll study hard in final term too.*

・ *It was difficult to write blog posts but it was fun reading everyone's posts!! I want to read the teacher's blog (translated from Japanese)*

Four of the 42 comments, or just under 10%, were solely negative, focusing on the timing of the blogging homework, initial difficulties in understanding the schedule and difficulties in selecting a topic, as shown in the following examples (all translated from Japanese):

・ *I couldn't really be bothered blogging before the exams.*

・ *At first, I didn't know whose blog posts I was supposed to comment on (how many people's posts?). I would be grateful if the information sheet was a bit easier to understand.*

・ *I had trouble deciding what to write about on my blog.*

Discussion

The goals of this project were to find out a) if blogs could be set up and integrated into the existing syllabus without taking up too much valuable class time or placing an unreasonable burden on the facilitator (the teacher-researcher) and b) if students could learn how to use this technology easily and liked using it to further their English development.

In terms of the first goal, the results suggest that this can be done. Although several hours were needed to prepare this blogging project, the worksheets and other materials could be used with all of the classes and can be used again so the time outlay was justified. Replicating this project in the future would require even less time as the worksheet has been prepared and the checklist and schedule would only require minimal changes. As for class time, this too was deemed acceptable. Although one full class was needed for set up, once blogging had been introduced it only required several minutes of each class and, depending on the number of blogs per class, between 12 and 30 minutes for monitoring from home. These time-commitments are reasonable given the benefits.

7

Turning to the second goal, students responded very positively to blogging and had little difficulty learning how to use this new technology. Feedback suggests that the majority of students not only enjoyed contributing, but also eagerly anticipated their classmates' contributions, which suggests they readily accepted becoming part of an online community. This is further reinforced by the fact that many students (71%) felt closer to their classmates though the blogs. In terms of difficulties, it seems that deciding on a topic posed the biggest problem, despite the fact that a list of suggestions was given on the schedule. Perhaps this is partly due to the students' enhanced awareness of their audience, as one student commented (in Japanese to her classmate but overheard by the teacher-researcher) that she'd had trouble choosing a topic that week because nothing exciting enough for others to read about had happened in her life. Assigning topics would overcome this obstacle, so should be considered.

Conclusion

This brief exploration of students' experiences with blogging is very encouraging, with feedback suggesting that the majority of students were able to learn the skills required to blog with relative ease and accepted blogging as a language-learning tool. The second phase of this project will delve further to evaluate blogging from a language development level, with the hope that the results will be similarly encouraging. At this stage, the research suggests that blogs cannot be used as a pedagogical tool without a substantial commitment from the teacher, both before and after they have been introduced to the students, and the students themselves, who need to learn how to use them and routinely add to them, but that the benefits justify the time and effort that is required.

References

Abu Bakar, N., Latif, H & Ya'acob, A. (2010). ESL Students feedback on the use of blogs for language learning, *3L The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 16 (1), 120-142. Retrieved September 1, 2011, from http://www.ukm.edu.my/~ppbl/3L/3L%20vol%2016(1)%202010/ Nadzrah%20Abu%20Bakar.pdf

Barrios, B. (2003). *The year of the blog: Weblogs in the writing classroom.* Retrieved September 2, 2011, from http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/barrios/blogs/index.html

Campbell, A. (2003). Weblogs for use with ESL classes. *The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IX.* Retrieved September 2, 2011, from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-Weblogs.html

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000) (Eds.). *Multiliteracies: literacy learning and the design of social features.* South Melbourne: Macmillian.

Godwin-Jones, R. (2003). Emerging technologies – blogs and wikis: Environments for online collaboration. *Language Learning and Technology*, 7(2), 12-16. Retrieved September 1, 2011, from http://cursa.ihmc.us/rid=1131480053328_1801720929_4296/godwin.pdf

Johnson, A. (2004), Creating a writing course utilizing class and student blogs. *The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. X.* Retrieved September 6, 2011 from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Johnson-Blogs/

Jones, S. J. (2006) Blogging and ESL writing: A case study of how students responded to the use of weblogs as a pedagogical tool for the writing process approach in a community college ESL writing class. *(Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2007).* Retrieved September 1, 2011, from https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2006/jonesd17626/jonesd17626.pdf

8

Oladi, S. and Rezaee, A. (2008) The effect of blogging on language learners' improvement in social interactions and writing proficiency. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies*, 2 (1), 73-87 Retrieved September 6, 2011, from http://www.ijls.net/volumes/volume2issue1/rezaii1.pdf

Seitzinger, J. (2006). Be constructive: Blogs, podcast, and wikis as constructivist learning tools, *Learning Solutions*, July. Retrieved September 4, 2011, from http://www.careersmarts.com/21/blogs%20wikis%20podcasts%20learning%20tools.pdf

（受理　平成23年９月20日）

9