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Boosting English Skills Through Blogging: Does It Work?

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Keywords

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Introduction

In this technologically advanced age, there are a multitude of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) options available to help learners on their path to English mastery. One of the most recent CALL tools to become popular is blogging (or weblogging as it is sometimes known). Those who advocate its use in language classrooms point to the many benefits it offers, such as creating English communities, providing a real-life way to use English and allowing learners to communicate directly in English once their lesson has ended. Blogs are also praised for directly helping learners improve their English skills, but to what extent do they do so? This project seeks to answer that question, drawing on data from 74 university students who completed a questionnaire about their views on blogging as a language learning tool and the direct impact blogging had on their English development.

Background

This is the second phase of a two-part project, the first of which gave the teacher's perspective on setting up and monitoring the blogs and ascertained students' feelings about this new learning tool. The results from the first phase indicated that for both small and large classes (10 to 39 students per class) setting up and monitoring class blogs was manageable for the teacher. In addition, the majority of students found it easy to learn how to use the class blogs, liked them and wished to continue blogging (Ohashi, 2011).

The benefits of blogging have been explored in the first phase of this project, but to briefly summarize them again here, blogging promotes creative writing and provides a way for students to interact socially (Oladi and Rezaee, 2008). It has also been credited with creating a discourse community, developing critical thinking skills, giving students a way to express themselves, motivating them to write and helping them to develop their word processing skills (Jones, 2006).

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Furthermore, Seitzinger (2006) suggests that blogs allow learners to construct knowledge collaboratively; a skill that will serve them well upon graduation. In addition, blogs create learner communities, provide the opportunity for situated writing practice, give students the opportunity to use English in a real-life way and help them develop new IT skills. These opportunities help students on multiple levels, comfortably situating blogging within the New London Group's Multiliteracies Approach to learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

A number of studies that evaluate blogs as a pedagogical tool have been published but there are not enough to make a full evaluation, especially in the EFL/ESL context. This action research project was conducted with the aim of adding to the existing body of research in this area, from the perspective of students enrolled at two Japanese universities. The main goal of this phase of the project was to find out if students believed the class blogs that were introduced actually helped them to develop their English language skills. Abu Bakar, Latif and Ya'acob (2010) previously found that students in a Malaysian university believed their reading, writing and communication skills and their confidence levels all improved as a result of blogging in English. They also collected data pertaining to students' perceptions of their vocabulary and grammar development and the results were very encouraging. This project sought to find out if students in Japanese universities who were blogging in groups for homework would have similarly positive results.

Methodology

The primary aim of this action research project was to find out a) if students believed blogs were a good language-learning tool and b) whether they felt that their English skills had actually improved through blogging. Both of these aims are addressed through a questionnaire that was administered towards the end of the second phase of the project.

Participants

Students from two universities in Japan participated in this project. The students were all enrolled in first and second-year English communication classes and had all participated in the first phase of the project. The same five classes that were chosen for the first phase were used in this phase, but there were slightly fewer participants (74 versus 85) due to a reduction in student numbers in the second semester (one class was compulsory in the first semester and an elective in the second) and absences on the day the questionnaire was administered. The vast majority of the students were Japanese and class sizes ranged from 6 to 39 students. All of the students were required to participate in the blogging project as part of their regular homework. They were given the questionnaire to complete in the final weeks of their year-long courses after the 10th and final blog post had been assigned for homework.

The Questionnaire

In order to collect data relating to the students' perceptions of the impact blogging had upon their English skills, a questionnaire was used. There were 17 questions, which were written in English and Japanese to ensure there were no misunderstandings. The questions can be divided into

two broad types: those which asked students their *general views* on the usefulness of blogging for developing a range of English skills and those which asked students to focus on the impact blogging directly had on *their* skills. In addition, there was a section for comments.

The questions employed a 4-point Likert Scale to determine the extent to which students believe blogging is useful in developing English reading, writing and communication skills as well as for sharing ideas in English, both in general and for them specifically. In addition, students were asked to assess whether blogging had helped them with grammar and vocabulary and increased their confidence. The comments section invited students to write their thoughts about blogging in either English or Japanese.

Results

As outlined above, this project aimed to assess blogging as a learning tool on two levels by finding out if students believe blogs are a good learning tool in general and whether they felt that their English skills had actually improved through blogging.

Initial results indicate that students view blogging as useful in assisting with English development. Their responses show they almost unanimously agree that blogging is a good tool for reading practice (91%) and writing practice (95%). In addition, 82% believe blogging is a good way to communicate in English and 86% believe it is a good way to share ideas. Finally, the vast majority of students believe blogging is a good way to practice using English, with only 14% believing otherwise.

Blogging as a Learning Tool: General Perceptions	n=74	SA	A	D	SD	SA/A	D/SD
Blogging is good for English reading practice		25	42	6	1	91%	9%
Blogging is good for English writing practice		45	25	4	0	95%	5%
Blogging is a good way to communicate in English		30	31	12	1	82%	18%
Blogging is a good way to share ideas in English		31	33	10	0	86%	14%
Blogging is not a good way to practice using English		2	8	31	33	14%	86%

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

Results that relate to individual self-assessments are also very encouraging, with the majority believing that blogging helped them improve their English reading skills (76%) and writing skills (80%). While fewer students felt blogging assisted with English communication skills (64%) and sharing ideas in English (69%) these categories still fared well, with very few students strongly disagreeing (1% and 7% respectively). Although not 'language development' per se, confidence levels were also assessed, with over half of the students (58%) indicating that their confidence in using English had increased due to blogging. In terms of motivation, blogging encouraged 64% to read more English and 61% to write more. As for practical language skills, blogs helped the majority of the students (82%) to learn new vocabulary, helped 77% of them to work on their inference skills (guessing new words) and improved the grammar of 69% of participants. Finally, students were asked to assess whether they felt blogging had helped them to improve their English skills. As it was feared they would say they had not improved out of modesty, this question was asked twice, in two

different ways. 64% said that blogging helped them to improve their English skills when the question was worded positively yet only 11% said it didn't help when the question was worded negatively (ie. 89% disagreed that it 'didn't help'). This last point will be looked at in detail in the discussion section.

Blogging as a Learning Tool: Self-Assessment	n=74	SA	A	D	SD	SA/A	D/SD
Blogging has helped me to improve my English reading skills		20	36	17	1	76%	24%
Blogging has helped me to improve my English writing skills		26	33	14	1	80%	20%
Blogging has helped me to improve my English communication skills		15	32	26	1	64%	36%
Blogging has helped me share my ideas in English		23	28	18	5	69%	31%
Blogging has increased my confidence in using English		15	28	24	7	58%	42%
Blogging has encouraged me to read more in English		11	36	24	3	64%	36%
Blogging has encouraged me to write more in English		12	33	22	7	61%	39%
Blogging has helped me to learn new vocabulary		24	37	12	1	82%	18%
My skill in guessing new words has improved through blogging		20	37	15	2	77%	23%
My grammar has improved through blogging		12	39	20	3	69%	31%
Blogging has improved my English skills		17	30	23	4	64%	36%
Blogging has not helped me to improve my English skills		3	5	40	26	11%	89%

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

Students' Comments

All students were invited to write comments and 42 opted to do so. Almost all of the comments were positive, with 93% of the comments either solely positive or positive but outlining an area of difficulty. Solely positive comments touched on changes in students' attitudes to English and other benefits that students felt they had received through blogging, as shown in the examples below:

- *As I read the blogs, I started to like reading English. It was fun for me to write my posts and I started to like writing in English too. I want to keep on blogging (translated from Japanese).*
- *When I read my friends' blogs and had a question about the grammar they had used, it made me go back to my posts and question what I had written. As such, I think blogging is good for writing practice (translated from Japanese).*
- *I think writing about my daily life in English was a good experience. Next time I want to challenge myself by writing higher level posts (translated from Japanese).*
- *I thank for this opportunity of blogging. It was very fun to write in English and know friend's feelings. I will continue to write blogs to improve my English.*

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Mainly positive comments include the following:

- *I was regularly writing posts and noticed around the start of summer that I was able to write smoothly (without hesitation). However, sometimes it was difficult to use prepositions and my posts sounded too formal (translated from Japanese).*

- *I think to write blog is not so easy. Write to blog is difficult, but, I think, blog is share with friends information. So, I think this point is very good.*
- *Making blog is improve my English skills. But, bad sentence make me confused.*
- *It was fun looking at the pictures but it was a bit difficult to read the posts. It was fun writing the posts but it was hard to write 100 words or more. However, it was fun writing (my ideas) in English on the blog (translated from Japanese).*

Three of the comments (7%) were solely negative, focusing on the difficulty of completing homework without an internet connection at home, the timing of the blogging homework and difficulties with topic selection, as illustrated below:

- *It was difficult for me to do the blog homework when I wasn't connected to the internet (translated form Japanese).*
- *When I write the blogs I have a small problem. Something that I want to write for the blog often happened on the weekend. So, to write blogs early sometime became a difficult thing.*
- *I didn't have something to write blogging. I thinked, but I couldn't find that. And I don't like blogging. Sorry.*

Discussion

This project aimed to ascertain two things: if students believe blogs are a good learning tool and whether they felt that their English skills had actually improved through blogging. These will be looked at in turn below.

In terms of the first goal, results indicate that students do indeed believe blogs are a good learning tool. Figures that relate to the perceived benefits blogs offer in terms of reading and writing are very similar (91% and 95% respectively) showing that the vast majority of students see blogs as a useful tool for developing these skills. Interestingly, support dropped when blogs were evaluated as an idea-sharing tool and a tool for practicing using English (both 86%). Perhaps this is because of the strong focus on speaking in many communication courses. As one student wrote, in response to the blogging questionnaire, "I like English. So, I want to speak English well". This student's response to "blogging is a good way to communicate in English" was rated lower than all of his or her other responses, suggesting that this student may not believe written English is as communicative as spoken English. In general, however, it appears that students see blogging as very beneficial, with one even suggesting that "blog is one of the most important tools to brush up our English" and another praising blogs for the social benefits they offer, stating "I think that blog is good study skill! Because blog is community."

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The second goal looked at benefits that students felt they had directly gained through blogging. The majority of students agreed that blogs helped them in all of the areas surveyed, but the level of agreement varied considerably between questions. First of all, there was strong support for the hypothesis that blogging helps students to improve their English reading and writing skills, with

76% and 80% respectively indicating that they felt blogging assisted them in these areas. Student comments in class and on the questionnaire indicate that as time went by, many students found it easier to read and write the blog posts and comments so with a longer project, there is the potential for even more agreement in these areas.

Similarly promising results were found when vocabulary and grammar skills were evaluated, with more than four out of five students (82%) believing that blogging helped them to learn new vocabulary, with 77% becoming better at guessing new words. This clearly shows that students can learn from their peers. Furthermore, despite a lack of corrections or other surface-level teacher feedback, 69% believed their grammar had improved through blogging, which means the students either learnt from each other or challenged themselves to self-correct. While very positive, these results are slightly lower than those of Abu Bakar, Latif and Ya'acob (2010). One possible reason for the difference is that their project linked blogging with discussions, so the students may have been able to use some of the same key structures and vocabulary both when blogging and speaking. If so, it is understandable that students would make more gains so linking discussions with blogs should be considered in future blogging projects.

As for motivating students and building confidence, the results were positive but received less support than in other areas. Blogging encouraged almost two thirds of the students to read and write more (64% and 61% respectively). Given that so many students said they enjoyed reading the blogs more support was expected, but as reading and writing are traditionally seen as "hard work", with many students indicating that they find both of these skills difficult, it is encouraging to see over half of the students felt motivated to do more in these areas. In addition, 58% believed their confidence in using English had increased. This factor received the lowest support from students. This may be because students still felt reluctant to share their ideas and put their English on display in such a public way or perhaps it is because students already felt confident sharing their ideas with their classmates.

Interestingly, students seemed to see communicating and sharing ideas rather differently. As communication is often linked to speaking, students' feelings about communicating in English were probed through questions pertaining to communicating in English and sharing ideas in English. While the overall results were roughly the same (64% versus 69%) the level of agreement varied considerably, with an extra 11% strongly agreeing that blogging helped them share their ideas.

- 6 Finally, the questionnaire sought to ascertain the extent to which students believed blogging had improved their English skills overall. As there was concern that students would be modest when it came to saying that their overall English level had improved (something that students in Japan tend to be reluctant to do) this question was asked both positively and negatively. The choice to only do this with one factor may be questioned, but this factor, which pertains to how the students saw their overall English development, was chosen as Japanese students generally tend to evaluate their overall English skill very modestly. When worded positively only 64% agreed that blogging

improved their English. However, 89% disagreed with the statement “blogging has not improved my English skills”. In other words, they may believe that it has improved their English. It is difficult to speculate on the reasons for this discrepancy in student responses beyond modesty or self-criticism and individual interpretations of nuances between “improved” and “not improved”. Nevertheless, whichever results are drawn on, it is suffice to say that the majority of students credited blogging with improving their English skills.

Conclusion

The findings of this minor research project are very promising, with results suggesting that blogging is beneficial to learners on many levels. Although a number of questions that could not be easily answered were raised in the discussion section, it is still evident that blogging helps learners to develop their language skills, at least in their own eyes. An area for comments below each question, rather than just at the end, would have provided valuable insight into the reasons students made their choices and as such should be considered when conducting research in this area in the future. Furthermore, an evaluation of samples of students’ blog posts taken at multiple points during the project would have allowed improvements to be evaluated from another perspective. Despite these shortcomings, it can be said that blogging is a useful language-learning tool and as such, it is worth teachers considering adding it to their language courses.

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