

The use of blogs in EFL teaching

O uso de blogs em EFL

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Abstract: *This paper aims at making a review of positive experiences that used blogs in classrooms of English as a foreign language around the world. It starts with a review of the concept and history of blogs. For this review, five articles by researchers from different countries were selected in order to obtain positive reports on the use of blogs in EFL focusing on improving reading, writing and vocabulary building. Despite not being very popular in Brazil, the use of blogs as a learning tool is being largely developed and researched in other countries and it has shown good results so far.*

Key words: *EFL; blogs; internet.*

Resumo: *O objetivo principal desse trabalho é fazer uma breve revisão de experiências consideradas positivas utilizando blogs em salas de aula de Inglês como língua estrangeira em âmbito internacional. Inicialmente, foi feita uma revisão a respeito do conceito bem como do histórico dos blogs. Para tanto, foram identificados cinco artigos de pesquisadores de diferentes países, selecionados com o objetivo de obter relatos positivos a respeito do uso de blogs em sala de aula focando a leitura, a escrita e a construção de vocabulário. Ainda não muito divulgado no Brasil, o uso de blogs como ferramenta de ensino vem sendo desenvolvido e pesquisado em vários países e mostrado, em sua grande maioria, bons resultados até o momento.*

Palavras-chave: *EFL; blogs; internet.*

1. Introduction

The internet has already established its place in everybody's lives, but its role as a learning tool is yet to be proven. The internet has made the world smaller and for sure education has profited a lot from it, especially English language learners. With the help of this wonderful technological tool, getting in contact with the language has become easier and quicker. Students and teachers have no longer to count only on books or ready made materials; the internet became an open field of information. Everything is available and can be accessed and used anytime.

This present reality was only a dream not so many years ago and as the volume of information available is so huge it is important to have some kind of guidance when it comes to selecting the good and useful ones.

“Technology merely extends our intention; it is entirely subject to our will“(LEANING, 2010). According to the author, thus, it is important to have in mind that we can make use of technology as an ally to help educators to improve and achieve their main purpose which is to pass knowledge the best way possible. Many studies are being conducted by scholars worldwide, in order to test models of education using the Internet as a learning tool. Among

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these studies, the use of blogs in order to improve reading, writing and vocabulary building have been a focus of attention of many EFL teachers.

2.1 Historic background and terminology

In a paper by Professor Marcus Leaning from University of Winchester, *Understanding blogs: just another medium?* (2010), he mentions that most histories and accounts of blogs and blogging indicate that the first use of the term “weblog” can be attributed to Jorn Barger in his web site “Robot Wisdom” in December 1997.

The first description of a specialized application available over the web that meets the contemporary definition of a blog and uses the term WebLog was made in an academic conference paper by G. Raikundalia and M. Rees entitled: *WebLog: exploiting the Webuse interface for document management in electronic meetings*, (LEANING, 2010).

Afterwards, the term was abbreviated by Peter Merholz, a web designer, in his site in 1999. Merholz split the word into “we blog”, though as Merholz himself acknowledges such word play would not be significant if a blogging tool named Blogger had not been released by Pyra Labs in August 1999 (MERHOLZ, 2002 apud LEANING, 2010).

2.2 What is a blog?

Technically, a blog is something rather simple; it is a type of website usually arranged in chronological order from the most recent “post” at the top of the main page to older entries toward the bottom.

Blogs are, usually, written by one person and are updated regularly. They are often written on a particular topic – there are blogs on virtually any topic someone can bring to mind. From photography, to spirituality, to recipes, to personal diaries to hobbies – blogging has as many applications and varieties as it can be imagined. Whole blog communities have sprung up around some of these topics putting people in contact with each other in relationships where they can learn, share ideas, make friends with and even do business with people who have similar interests from around the world.

The structure of blogs permits (1) comments to be left by readers and links to other blogs; (2) they also allow the “feeds”, which are automatic publications of content from other sites and blogs, and (3) the content of a blog may be sent to other blogs for publication.

According to Leaning (2010), internet communications, including blogs, are a constantly changing and transforming system of social practice, given the media is constantly being transformed and changed by new technologies. Blogs are viewed as a media technology that will transform life and the social practices that we engage in (LEANING, 2010). Although

the use of blogs in classrooms is not very popular in Brazil yet, we can count with many studies already conducted in other countries around the world and so far the results seem to be very positive.

3. Some positive experiences

In this part of the article, the aim is to describe and analyze five positive experiences concerning the use of blogs in EFL classrooms around the world. The five articles used for this paper were chosen because they all have positive experiences in EFL teaching using blogs as a learning tool in common. The articles are presented in chronological order in an attempt to follow the progress achieved by the use of technology brought into education. The articles are the following:

1. *Weblogs for Use with ESL Classes*, by Aaron Campbell, EFL professor from Kyoto University (2003);
2. *Using Blogs in an EFL writing class*, by Wen-shuenn, professor from the Department of Foreign Languages e Literature of Chung Hua University, Taiwan (2004);
3. *Blogs in TEFL: A New promising Vehicle*, by Professor Wu from Luoyang Foreign Language University, China (2005);
4. *Integrating Internet Technology into the EFL Classroom: A Case Study* by professor Mary Yamauchi, from Kobe Kaisei College, Japan (2008);
5. *Hungarian University Student's Blog in EFL: Shaping Language and Social Connections* by Professor József Horváth from University of Pécs, Hungary (2009).

The first experience is presented by Aaron Campbell, an EFL professor from Kyoto University in Japan. And, despite blogs only became popular in 1999, he has been using them with his students since 2003 and has written many articles about the topic.

In The Internet TESL Journal in February 2003, he published a paper, *Weblogs for Use with ESL Classes*, in which he introduced three ways that weblogs can be used to support classroom learning. Besides, he also explained the definition of blogs and how to put them in practice in the classroom.

In the same TESL Journal, in December 2005, he published another article, *Weblog Applications for EFL/ESL Classroom Blogging: A Comparative Review*, with the purpose of helping teachers to get familiar with blogging, discussing what is important when choosing a blogging application and comparing the features of some of the available applications. He pointed out that what makes weblogs attractive to RFL educators is that they give the students a chance to put what they are learning in the classroom in interactive ways. He stated that, in

addition to reading and writing practices, blogs allow learners to share their personal ideas and share those very ideas with people around the world..

Campbell (2005) described the ideal blog, which should include the following nine features:

- a. It should have a WYSIWYG² text editor, making formatting and hyper-linking text as simple as possible, while eliminating the need of using HTML entirely.
- b. It should give learners the ability to set access levels and to moderate comments, thus engendering a sense of control and privacy if needed.
- c. It should offer a template of themes and colors, allowing learners to customize their pages in order to accommodate their individual design preferences.
- d. It should come with built-in, easy-to-use social networking features, like personal profiles, friends lists, tags and tag searching, user communities, etc., so that learners can easily find conversation partners who have something in common with them and are willing to interact.
- e. It should have a built-in aggregator, making it possible for learners to subscribe to weblogs of interest, thus giving them relevant and stimulating reading material.
- f. It should allow learners to easily post and share photo, sound, and video files, thereby extending and enhancing their means of expression.
- g. It should be web-based, totally free of service charges and advertising, and have an easy sign-up process.

Furthermore, Campbell (2005) suggests that before committing to the use of any particular weblog application in an educational setting, he recommended that the teacher should, first, sign up for several different services and test out the features. He also affirmed that the teacher should choose the one that is the easiest and most enjoyable for the students to use.

The second experience is a research conducted by professor Wen-shuenn Wu from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Chung Hua University in Taiwan. The research, called *Using Blogs in an EFL writing class*, was conducted in 2004 with the main objectives being of (i) giving explicit instructions to set up a personal blog, (ii) to discuss the advantages of blog in an EFL writing class, (iii) providing a preliminary report about student's reaction to the use of blog in English classes, and, lastly, (iv) suggesting further research on blogs to English learning and teaching.

According to Wu (2004) ,there are many advantages for using blogs in an EFL class, such as: (i) it is very easy to design and maintain; (ii) teachers can access and create, edit,

² It is an acronym for "what you see is what you get".

assign homework, and review materials in a very organized way and in chronological order; (iii) blogs can promote exploration of websites in English, once the teacher can be able to place links to their source websites and students can have the chance to read articles; (iv) with the automatic date-stamping function, both teachers and students are able to know clearly when assignments are turned in; (v) most students will write more carefully if they know that they are going to publish their articles online for authentic readers who may comment on their postings.

For Wu (2004), even though blogging services are free and user-friendly, whether they can be used effectively in language learning and teaching still depends on how the course using blogs is designed. Wu, thus, concludes that, with a well organized instructional design, the use of blogs can be definitely a plus to English teachers.

The third paper analyzed is by Professor Chengyi Wu from Luoyang Foreign Language University in China called *Blogs in TEFL: A New promising Vehicle* and was presented at the 3rd Asia TEFL International Conference held in Beijing in November 2005. The paper was intended to provide a definition for a blog, to analyze the features of a blog, to formulate possible ways to use it in EFL classes, and to discuss potential advantages and shortcomings of using blogs in EFL learning settings.

Wu (2005) declared that the first industry to really use blogs was the news media. Journalists started to post their stories in blogs giving up-to-the-minute information on various topics. He also affirmed that blogs are now being used for many different purposes, such as web publishing, journalism, and education.

He stated that there are numerous possibilities for a blog to be used in the EFL classroom setting, but a special mention should be made to Campbell (2003) who made a great contribution by suggesting three types of weblogs: the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog, with each type being used in a different way.

Summarizing, the Tutor Blog, is a type of weblog run by the tutor for the learners and it may be used in the following manners: (i) it gives daily reading practice to the learners and should contain a casual and natural writing style to develop learner's familiarity with native language patterns; (ii) it promotes exploration of English websites in order to increase the confidence and help students to overcome their fears of reading in English; (iii) it may encourage online verbal exchange by use of comment buttons; (iv) it may provide class or syllabus information, as well as entries in the blog, that can also serve to remind students about homework assignments and upcoming discussion topics; (v) it may serve as a resource of links for self-study, for example, links to online quizzes, English news sites, key-pal networks, audio and video files for listening practice and EFL interactive websites.

The Learner Blog is, similarly, run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners and may be best suited for reading and writing classes. Reading assignments can be followed by blog postings on the thoughts of each learner and can

also be used as journals for writing practice developing a sense of ownership. In addition, whatever is written can be read instantly.

The Class Blog is the type of blog which results from a collaborative effort of an entire class. The possible uses are: (i) in conversation-based classes it may be used like a free-form bulletin board for learners to post messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics; (ii) with intermediate and advanced learners, class blogs might also be useful for facilitating project-based language learning, where learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others; (iii) it may also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange. In this scenario, learners from different countries would have joint access and publishing rights to the blog.

Finally, Wu (2005) concluded that the blogs are new arrivals as an educational technology and on the one hand is an advanced and convenient feature in comparison to other tools; nevertheless, educators are less familiar with it, which can be a handicap for its application in educational activities. He also pointed out that, despite not originally designed for education, blogs are drawing attention from EFL educators.

The fourth study to be presented was conducted by Professor Mary Yamauchi, from Kobe Kaisei College in Japan. The study, called *Integrating Internet Technology into the EFL Classroom: A Case Study*, was conducted in 2008. As part of the research on effective integration of technology in university classrooms, she conducted a course in which students were supposed to learn research and presentation skills by using English in conjunction with computers and the Internet.

During the course, professor Yamauchi asked the students first to create their own blog and update them everyday. They could post photos directly from their cell phones, adding sentences to express their meaning. By doing that labeling system, the intention was to encourage writing and reading in English. The students could share their favorite things and many other information they wanted about the classes.

According to her, using blogs can offer a gadget to facilitate for the students to track and share each other's posts, which further motivated them to improve their own posts.

The results for the use of blogs were the following:

During the twelve weeks after they first created their own blogs, many of the students actively engaged in creating blog posts. Eleven students (55%) always worked hard and published more than 30 posts in about 10 weeks. Five of them created around 50-70 excellent posts. Eight students (40%) took longer to get used to it and published less than 30 posts, but did a good job sometimes. Only one student was unsuccessful in all activities. On the other hand, using labels to categorize posts was relatively difficult: six students (30%) did/could not learn to use labels at all.

The results were very positive and professor Yamauchi (2008) pointed out that this is extremely beneficial in an EFL environment like Japan where the students often lack the opportunity to produce output. She also affirmed that a bigger control by the teacher is necessary in the early stages to engage students in blogging in English.

Yamauchi (2008) concluded, and this requires more than empirical data, that if the students can feel proud of themselves for having learned and created something through these activities, negative feelings associated with learning English can be reduced.

The fifth and concluding experience to be presented is a study by professor József Horváth from University of Pécs in Hungary published in *The TESL* in 2009, called *Hungarian University Student's Blog in EFL: Shaping Language and Social Connections*. In the paper, he focused on the linguistic and social benefits for students in the course held in 2008. He explained that EFL reading and writing courses are a basic component of programs in education in Hungary and at the University of Pécs, the second largest in the country, this is a two-semester course.

Mr. Horváth affirmed that with the course he aimed to make both the reading and writing activities relevant to the students by ensuring that some of the reading material was student-produced; hence their use of blogging was a tool for learning. To create an easy-to-reach hub for information related to the course (such as tasks, tips and reminders), and to provide a central area to store all student blog links, he set up his own blog, Take Off: Tips and Tasks for Readers and Writers (<http://take-o-f-f.blogspot.com>).

The research was conducted for thirteen weeks, when twenty-one students took the course and the majority chose online blogging. Here are the rules for the Blogging according to professor Horváth: (i) blog started by the time specified; (ii) friendly posts; (iii) regular comments on other students' blogs (one or more every week); (iv) regular posts; (v) Spell-checked posts; (vi) fluent writing; (vii) accurate writing; (viii) interesting posts; (ix) customized blog; and, (x) individual option.

Horváth noticed that some of the posts were produced during class and students were encouraged to bring printouts of blog posts along, and these were first discussed in pairs or small groups, which were often followed up by students starting to draft a new entry or a new comment to be published online later. Professor Horváth also mentions that the quantity of language produced was impressive, as well as the volume of language, both read and written in the posts and comments, provided some evidence that motivation was being maintained and in some cases even raised.

The final score for the course was determined adding up the score from the student's self- evaluation and assessment by the teacher using the same criteria. For Horváth, it is crucial to involve bloggers in the process of evaluation, as this was yet another factor in the

development of learner independence and autonomy, which should always be an aim when sustainable skills are being practiced.

The studies presented above constitute a very small attempt to place together the methodology of blogs as a learning tool.

5. Conclusion

After reading and analyzing the five studies about using blogs around the world, it was possible to notice that after the first attempts of using blogs in classrooms, more educators are willing to help develop this learning tool. The articles framed the use of blogs from a very similar approach. The researchers described their methods very carefully and all of them seemed to have similar point of views on how to develop a course using blogs.

They all agreed that more research should be conducted and there are still many things to be discovered, but there is no doubt teachers now have a powerful tool in their hands. It seemed that with the increasing need to learn a foreign language, teachers and students are more willing to find out better ways to make the complex learning task easier and more effective, and the teaching of a foreign language, as well. Although considering the use of blogs very demanding for the teacher, and a task that requires a very well prepared educator, researchers considered it as a great opportunity for class improvement.

As for the use of blogs in EFL teaching seems to be something relatively new, its efficiency is already to be proven, but we could see that all the five articles reviewed have shown very positive experiences to report. Based on their experiences, it is possible to conclude that blogs can be a great opportunity to improve reading, writing and vocabulary building, but always with the help of a well developed course and a prepared professional.

The use of blogs as a learning tool seems to be not yet common in Brazilian EFL classrooms. However, there is an increasing number of papers and essays about the theme. A very interesting study conducted in 2007 by Marcel Bittencourt Tavares, called *Investigating Brazilian Public Sector EFL Reading Strategies for the Blog Genre*, is a good example. This paper was a thesis to obtain a master's degree in Linguistics at Universidade Federal Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro and aims at investigating both the degree to which blogs are characterized as a socially recognized genre and the reading behavior of EFL students.

Another example is an article by Isabel Cristina Vollet Marson and Ademir Valdir dos Santos also published in 2007 called *Internet and Pedagogical Practice: Possibilities for English Teaching* that argues about the pedagogical possibilities of the internet as a learning tool. Besides being a very good study does not mention blogs specifically and could not be used as part of this paper.

It is to be expected that the previous researches as the ones reviewed in this paper can help and encourage more research in order to help Brazilian teachers to improve their deeds. In a country like Brazil, where the necessity of learning English is so great, everybody will benefit from an extra opportunity. Not only the students will benefit from a different, more relaxed way to learn, but also the teachers who can make use of another tool to teach and achieve better results.

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