

IMPLEMENTING BLOGS AS A LEARNING TOOL IN ASIAN EFL/ESL LEARNING CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

“Weblogs” or “Blogs” is a type of technology that allows writing personal journals online that can be published and viewed over the web. Even though blogs are being used for personal, educational, journalistic and commercial purposes worldwide, it is not a common practice among the non-native English users in Asia. This paper points out that a blog can be an effective tool for EFL/ESL users of Asia for improving their English skills. It also explains how blogging not only helps in improving the basic language skills of the blog users but also develops other skills of EFL/ESL users like communicative and critical thinking abilities. The purpose of this paper is to find out to what extent blogging can help improve English language skills. It suggests that the integration of blogs into EFL/ESL learning process can motivate and influence the learners in learning the language. The paper concludes with recommendations for implementing blogging as a useful tool for EFL/ESL learners and teachers.

Key words: blogging, technology in teaching, ELT, ESL, EFL.

I. Introduction

Coming up with the best or the most effective way to teach and learn English has always been one of the most potential challenges in English Language Teaching (ELT). One of the latest approaches of teaching and learning English is by integrating technology in the classroom environment. This approach combines traditional classroom learning with an appropriate use of technology and e-learning. Blogging is a tool that can function as a facilitator in the whole language learning process by providing participants with an environment that encourages them to learn. However, not enough is known about if and how blogging, combined with traditional classroom teaching techniques, can help improve ESL/EFL learners' language skills, particularly in the Asian context. The purpose of this paper is to identify the effect of blogging on learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL).

II. What Is A Blog?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online the noun “blog” means “A frequently updated website consisting of personal observations,

excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary.” McIntosh (2005) expands this definition in the following way:

Historically, a weblog, or ‘blog’ for short, is recognized by its regularly updated, time and date stamped posts, running down the computer screen in chronologically reverse order (i.e. the most recent post comes first). Crucially, there is an ‘Add Comment’ feature so that readers of posts can leave their opinions, questions or thoughts. Finally, there is a writing style element: blogs are written by one individual who gives his or her thoughts in a generally relaxed, ‘spoken’ style. (2)

On the Internet, a “Blog” usually means an online journal, personal or professional, that is frequently updated and which is intended for general public consumption. The essential characteristics of the blog are its journal form, typically a new entry at regular intervals, and its informal style. Blogs also often include different kinds of media like photos, audios and videos. Because of the relative quickness and ease of publishing, the number of blog users has grown rapidly in recent years, and

we can now observe blogs being used for personal, educational, journalistic as well as commercial purposes.

A wide variety of blog uses can be observed in the higher educational and research sectors since 2000. Many foreign educators have started applying this technology to classroom instruction and language learning also (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Richardson, 2004).

III. Why Use Blogs?

Nowadays there are web tools like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Google Plus* and *Instagram* available on the Internet. Still there are some notable differences between blogs and all these popular social media sites. Blog is like an online journal to keep and an electronic book to read. The subject matter of a blog might be anything like a personal diary, personal opinions or general information about any topic. Publishing on blog is comparatively easier than publishing something in newspaper or book. Doing the former is also more economical and convenient. People do not need to go through the rigorous process of review and selection or pay anything to publish something on their blogs. Whatever they want to share or not share it is totally *their* call. In addition to that, while sites like *Facebook* or *Twitter* are great social networks to connect and share things with the world, they are not more appropriate than blogs because blogs are tailor made for writing and publishing. These sites are not primarily meant for sharing long posts expressing thoughts and opinions of the users. In comparison, blog is the only tool that includes almost all the features of the other tools and a lot more.

Additionally, blogs do not require any sophisticated software or in-depth knowledge of computer programming. Blogs offer several security options, such as limiting access for reading and posting. The blogger has the total control of who is authorized to view sensitive or confidential information since he has the access to the blog's security settings alone. One blog can have a single author or a number of authors. One of the best things about blogging is that it disregards the status of users—all users are equal.

There are numerous reasons for using blogs in education, such as to provide a real audience for

the students' writing, to provide extra reading practices for students, to encourage learners to participate. The novelty factor of blogging creates learner interest in starting to use blogs. It is usually claimed that blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. Language learners can open personal blogs and use them as their electronic portfolios that show development over time. They could also use personal blogs that are linked to a course and that reflect the course development over time. By publishing blogs on the Internet, the learner has the possibility of writing for readers beyond his cultural and geographical borders. Readers of a blog in turn can comment on what they have read. This kind of self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of the learners, who may be more thoughtful (in terms of content and structure) once they become aware that they are writing for a real audience. This eventually creates a sense of personal responsibility in them.

One of the biggest reasons for using blogs in language teaching is their general set up (Grewling, 2004). Blogs invite participation and have the potential to democratize a classroom since the learners are given the chance of equal participation. Furthermore, active participation of the quieter students is increased in online environments. Pinkman (2005) says that blogs give learners more control over their own learning and when created by students themselves, blogs can also give students the feeling of ownership of a personal space, a sense of belonging that is not so easily achieved in any face-to-face environment. Additionally, scholars believe that students who publish content on the Internet for a wide audience are more likely to produce higher quality content than students who write only for the class (Ciftci & Kocoglu, 2011).

Blogging provides opportunities for developing one's English language skills in many ways. It facilitates the students' critical thinking skills. Most bloggers use the whole blogging environment for self-expression and self-empowerment as writing there makes them become more thoughtful and more critical in their writing (Blood, 2002). A study done in Malaysia by Nadzrah (2007 & 2009) indicates that learners use English language constructively through online interaction on blogs, such as through discussions, giving opinions and writing.

Apart from that, blogging provides examples for students to model and to learn from. Kim (2011) suggests that blogs can enhance students' communication contexts. Publishing reflective commentaries on the Internet is an effective way for students to share each other's opinions and thoughts. Not only will readership increase when bloggers see each other's content, they can learn from one another, thereby motivating them to produce better content next time. Furthermore, the creation of online portfolios of them on the web amounts to a showcasing of their works over the development period of their learning. These are a display of the learner's growth and reflection on their learning. When a sizeable number of interested visitors give comments and input to a blog, a community of bloggers/ learners may be formed automatically.

Blogging also has a positive effect on the students' quality of writing. The quality of writing in blogs is usually manifested in several ways. Because of the presence of an active audience the bloggers tend to become more aware as they write with their audience in mind. The feedback that they receive from various sources as well as the different types-critical and non-critical- also affects the quality of their writing.

Additionally, blogging helps improving speaking ability in learners. A limited number of studies on the effects of blogging on speaking skills focus on the fact that blogs are effective tools for developing conceptualization brainstorming, monitoring, articulation, evaluation, self-presentation and information exchange skills (Baker & Westrup, 2003; Baniabdelrahman, 2013; Maggie & Deniz, 2011). Video blogging or 'vlogging' tends to have a positive effect on improving learners' fluency, accuracy and accent or language complexity. Such online oral diaries are a key component of learning the target language, as they allow for a more personal and nuanced use of the language in a safe environment. Doing the videos online offers learners the opportunity to practice their language skills anywhere and with little prior preparation, which keeps them involved in the process (Thomas, 2009).

IV. Research Design

The paper studies the effects of blogging on EFL/ESL users. It also investigates the attitudes of

the bloggers towards language learning through blog. The case study used purposive sampling and 26 bloggers in total participated in the study. Using mixed methods, data for this study were obtained from an online questionnaire (Appendix). The main focus of this study was the bloggers who post mostly about books and literature since it gave a better idea of their development. This study consisted of both male and female participants. They had a variety of experiences in regards to using English. Their ages ranged from 14 to 30. They belonged to Asian countries where English is not the mother tongue. All of them were bloggers who blog about their thoughts and opinions on a wide range of books and book related news.

For this research data were collected using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed in a structured-interview format. It consisted of 16 questions in English. English was used with the purpose of observing the ability of the participants to express their ideas and answers in that language. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice as well as open-ended items. With the consent of the participant bloggers data were collected from 1 June 2015 to 5 June 2015. In the questionnaire the participants were requested to report only what they actually practice, not what they think was correct or would like to practice. After a review of the questionnaire, no missing responses for the data analysis were found and it was, therefore, analyzed for the results. This questionnaire served the purpose of getting an overall idea of the participants' perception and preferences about blogging and English learning. All the bloggers who participated in the study had an intermediate level of knowledge in English. All of them have studied English in the class at some point. The questionnaire was sent to them through a common sharing link online. After completing it they submitted it and there was no scope for them to edit it further.

V. Findings

The first four survey questions were asked for some basic information only (Appendix). Apart from age and sex the questions aimed at getting an idea of the participants' knowledge regarding the Internet and blogging. The received results are reported in Table 1 to describe the sample of participants that were surveyed.

Table 1: Participants' Age, Sex and Years of using the Internet and blog

Sex	Male	Numbers
Age	Female	18
	14-19	10
	20-25	9
Using Internet for	26-30	6
	More than 5 years	15
	More than 3 years	8
Blogging for	More than a year	3
	About 4-3 years	9
	About 2-1 years	9
	Less than a year	8

Question 5 was designed to understand how technically capable the participants are at blogging. 69.23% of the participants find it “*Quite Easy*” to create and run a blog with the services currently available. 23.08% of them think “*It's Okay*” while the rest 7.69% find it “*Quite Hard*” to manage a blog for its technicalities.

Question 6 aimed at understanding how much time participants have spent writing and sharing their thoughts on their blogs. 53.85% of the participants state that they have published 21-40 posts. 38.46% say they have published more than 40 posts on their blogs.

Question 7 was designed to see whether or not the bloggers are actually comfortable with sharing their ideas with the world. 65.38% of these participants admit they were reluctant to express themselves in the beginning but as they started spending time participating in various blogging activities they started to open up to others. 26.93% are still not comfortable with the idea of sharing their personal thoughts and opinions with the world while 7.69% mention that one of the reasons they started blogging in the first place was to have their own place to voice their thoughts.

Questions 8-10 intended to see if and to what extent the bloggers are involved in socializing and interacting with others. 57.69% mention they are not comfortable with the idea of sharing their blog posts with people they personally know. 42.31% find it rather motivating to share their blog content with known people. Regarding comments, 69.23% say readers and other bloggers comment on their blogs in general while the rest of the 30.77% say they get occasional/ no comments. Apart from that

73.08% say they enjoy discovering new blogs and interacting with different bloggers.

Questions 11-12 meant to find out the difficulties faced by the bloggers while blogging and how they overcome such issues. 65.40% of the participants mention that they have/used to have problems expressing their ideas in English and often required external help to complete a post. The difficulties they faced were mostly related to organization of thoughts, putting them down using proper words and being satisfied with what they have written. Their feedback is reported in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Summary of the difficulties participants face while blogging in English

Common Difficulties	Participants
Organizing the ideas	38.4%
Meaningful expression	27%
Writing complex sentences	15%
Applying correct grammar	11%

Question 13 intended to find out if the bloggers themselves feel any noticeable change in their language use. Most answered that blogging has helped them think more critically and coming up with ideas more quickly. They can use English more often and bring necessary references when needed without thinking about mistakes. They can interact with others in English without much hesitation and also understand most written materials by others without the help of a dictionary. Table 3 shows a summary of the responses of the participants who think blogging has influenced their English skills some way or the other.

Table 3: Summary of responses of the participants

After-effects of blogging	Participants
Improved critical thinking ability	34.61%
Spontaneous writing	50%
Less hesitant about sharing personal opinions and feelings	15.38%
Less worried about making mistakes while interacting	30.8%
Carrying on a conversation more confidently	23.08%
Understanding others' opinions expressed in English more effectively	57.7%

Question 14 was designed to see what the participants like the most about blogging. All of them almost unanimously agree that blogging make them learn from each other, either from sound structures, or the way they use different expressions or interact or from their committed mistakes.

Question 15 meant to find out which aspect of blogging they did not like. For this they pointed out some of the problems they usually encounter while blogging, such as having a poor or no internet connection, not being able to type fast enough which often makes blogging to be time consuming and tiring.

Question 16 was designed to see what the participants' opinions are about using blogging as a learning tool in the class. 57.69% of the participants think it would be great to use blogging as a learning tool. 34.62% think traditional classroom teaching should not be mixed with blogging while 7.69% express no opinion on this.

After blogging regularly for a while, the blogs somehow become pieces of every bloggers' lives. Through blogs they get to express their likes, dislikes, thoughts, beliefs, emotions, feelings, dreams, ideologies and personalities. Their readers or the visitors get a better idea of how they might be as individuals from their content. As the bloggers are in control of their blogs, only they themselves have the opportunity to select the topics they are interested in writing about. In most of the cases, picking up a topic of interest motivates them to write in the first place. The role of interaction and explicit feedback provided by the readers of these blogs also play an important role in the overall process of developing their language skills.

It is evident that blogging has turned into an effective way to help EFL/ESL users practice the language quite successfully. The hobby of blogging seems to generate a significant amount of enthusiasm for using English. Users who used to be reluctant to use English in their daily lives later realized it to be stimulating and made appreciative comments about it as well. Additionally, engaging in purposeful and relevant communication through comments and other feedbacks, blogging for a real audience make them approach it with more responsibility and originality, leading to their gradual language development and growth. Another improvement that takes place is in their

reading skills. Whatever the nature of reading is, an opportunity for language learning takes place whenever the learners encounter something that appears different or interesting, such as new vocabulary, new ideas or argument or a new sentence structure (Izquierdo & Reyes, 2009). This also requires them to perform critical thinking. Based on the findings it can be emphasized that using blogs in EFL/ESL classrooms would contribute in enhancing the learners' processes of language learning. It is worth mentioning that the social interaction which takes place in the blogs is really beneficial for the learners to learn new knowledge and information from their peers (Downes, 2004) as well as increasing their overall critical thinking ability. Therefore, an amalgamation of this blogging tool and the traditional classroom teaching to learn English can go a long way to meet the EFL/ESL learning objectives.

VI. Implementation

Since a blog can be about anything and initially it can be overwhelming for the learners to manage one completely on their own, the teacher can start by setting up a blog for the class. The students will be added as contributing bloggers and the blog will be an outcome of the collaborative effort of an entire class. All of them will not only be able to give comments but also publish, edit, and delete the posts. They can be given the choice to write about anything from their course syllabus. To encourage the students, the teacher will count it as an assignment at the end of the course. This will motivate the students to actively participate in the blog too and get the most out of this experience. In order to implement blogging as a teaching-learning tool and make the most out of it, two things can be done primarily:

1. Provide training to language instructors

To implement blogging as an effective learning tool among ESL/EFL users, language teachers should be first made aware of the role of blogging in interactions and communications in the target language. To make the learners aware of blogging tools and teach them how to blog effectively the language teachers themselves must be aware of it first. They need ample support and training and this can be done by conducting teacher education programs. Proper training and workshops can help them understand how to use blogs in their

classrooms and tackle the technical difficulties. Various seminars and certificate programs can be developed for institutions to motivate the teachers to train themselves.

2. Provide materials and resources

Another thing to bear in mind is the lack of the resources needed to make it all work. The importance of materials cannot be ignored as well-designed tasks and accessibility to the Internet are the main elements necessary to maximize the use of blogs for learning and communications (Lee, 2011). Some institutions, like universities have access to computer and the Internet but most of the times even these are not sufficient to meet the needs of a huge number of learners. Given the economic condition of Bangladesh and other similar countries, no overnight solution is possible. Government and non-government authorities might need to step in and provide extra funding needed to obtain the kind of technological facilities that are required.

Apart from that, a fixed and standard way of evaluation is crucial too. Since the teacher will be assessing blog activities of the learners and see whether they have made any improvements or not, the teachers and course planners should design some assessment standards and criteria that meets the students' needs and is useful in evaluating their progress.

VII. Conclusion

Findings from the study demonstrate that blogging contributes to creating an environment in which the bloggers can participate and interact actively and are given an opportunity to practice EFL/ESL beyond the traditional classroom teaching-learning system. It is also observed how blogs can help the learners share what they have learned and this way help each other as they eventually become more capable of using the language. Teachers and educators should work to provide the learners with an environment that motivates them to share, interact, think critically, analyze problems at hand and provide possible solutions to them. According to Prensky (2009) educators should not have as a pretext the fact that some of the learners do not have access to a computer or the expenses of Internet cannot be met; they should try to provide as many opportunities to them as possible for an effective and seamless learning experience.

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APPENDIX
(Questionnaire for the Participants)

(For multiple choice questions, use **bold typeface** to answer)

1. Age:
2. Sex:
3. How long have you been using the Internet?
A. more than 5 years B. more than 3 years C. more than a year D. less than a year
4. When did you start blogging?
A. About 4-3 years ago B. About 2-1 years ago C. less than a year ago
5. Do you think it is quite easy to create and maintain your own blog with the services available online?
A. Quite easy B. Quite hard C. It's okay
6. How many articles (approx.) have you posted since you started blogging?
A. 1-20 B. 21-40 C. 40+
7. Do you feel comfortable in using blog as a platform for sharing your ideas with the world?
A. Yes, I do B. I didn't use to C. No, I don't

Why?

8. Have you invited your friends/ people you know to read your blog?
A. Yes, I have.
B. No, I haven't.
Why? _____
9. Do you receive comments on your blog posts in general?
A. Yes, I do.
B. Occasionally/ No, I don't.
10. Do you enjoy finding out about new blogs and interact with them on their posts?
A. Yes, I do. B. No, I don't.
11. What was/is your major difficulty when writing in English on your blog?
A. Organizing the ideas B. Meaningful expression
C. Writing complex sentences D. Applying correct grammar E. No difficulties.
12. When you post something on your blog, do you look up dictionaries or books or ask someone if you don't know how to express your ideas in English?
A. Yes I do B. No, I don't C. I used to but not anymore
13. Do you think that blogging has helped you improve your English skills in general?
A. Yes, it has.
How? _____
B. No, it hasn't.

14. What is that you like the most about blogging?

15. Which part of blogging you don't like?

16. Do you think blogging can be useful as a learning tool in English classes as well?

A. I think it's a great idea.

B. I don't think traditional teaching and blogging should be combined.

C. No opinion.

Thank you for your participation! :)