Blogging for Education:
Unleashing the Potential of the Humble Blog
A Case Study into the Application of Blog as Part of a Project Portfolio

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Abstract

The dynamism of information technology and of recent developments in the field of technology has impacted the world of education in more ways than one. Weblogs or blogs, as they are commonly known, have now become an increasingly popular form of communication for teenagers and young adults, making it a potentially useful medium for the teaching of the English Language.

This research report is aimed at demonstrating how blogs can be used in the classroom to practice language skills and also build learner confidence and independence. It includes a discussion into some of the key considerations of using blogs in the classroom and also some of the activities that may be used to encourage learners to not only work independently but collaboratively.

Introduction

Although the history of computer assisted language learning, or commonly known as CALL can be traced back to the 1950s, it has only been in the 1980s that this field of language learning has, as summarized by Dudeney and Hockly (2007, p.7) "moved beyond the use of computer programmes to the use of the Internet and web-based tools". Clearly, as demonstrated by CALL applications of today, the role of the computer has progressed far beyond the "mechanical tutor" (Warschauer & Healey, 1998) of the 1960s and 1970s, towards now playing multiple roles including a "stimulus" as well as a "tool" (Warschauer, 1996).

This paper, prioritizing the role of CALL in the world of education aims to achieve three things. First, it is aimed at discussing the related literature associated with the development of CALL, including the motivating factors and the benefits of CALL to the language classroom. In the second part of this report, I will look at how weblogs can be used to complement the teaching of Business English at college level and evaluate its effectiveness in teaching the module. The penultimate part of this research report is aimed at discussing the future implications of using weblogs to teach language.

The different faces of CALL

Computer assisted language learning has a rich history although it is a relatively new development in English Language Teaching. Spawned from the emergence of computers and guided by the ever-developing world of information technology, CALL has had its fair share of supporters and detractors. However, its undeniable potential in the educational world has clearly motivated a growing body of research in this field. Aptly defined by Levy (1997, p.1) as being "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language learning and teaching", CALL, like computer and information technology is dynamic in nature and very much dependent on "the level of development of the technology" of a particular period of time (Levy 1997, p.1).

The different phases of CALL, as in Warschauer's (1996) categorization base itself on the different corresponding theories of learning of a specific period of time. For example, Behaviourist CALL is "informed by the behaviorist learning model" (Warschauer & Healey 1998, p.3) and prioritizes the role of the computer as a tutor. Developed mainly for mainframe computers, Behaviourist CALL allowed for "learners to proceed at their own face" and at the same time, provide "non-judgemental feedback" (Warschauer, 1997).

However, Behaviourist CALL was undermined when as postulated by Warschauer (1997), language practitioners and researchers started to reject the behaviourist theory both on the "theoretical" and "pedagogical" level. In addition to that, developments in the computing world, mainly the introduction of the micro-computer also lent to the emergence of "Communicative CALL". Again, as in the case of Behaviorist CALL, Communicative CALL was also based on a learning theory, in its case "cognitive theories that regarded learning a process of discovery, expression and development" (Warschauer & Healey 1998, p.57). In this particular phase, the computer still retained the role of a tutor, but also took on an

additional role of assisting and directing learning. Communicative CALL also prioritized the computer as a "stimulus" (Warschauer, 1996) encouraging learners to explore the language they are learning through authentic situations, very different from Behaviourist CALL which stressed on the "drill and practice" method (Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

Like Behaviourist CALL, Communicative CALL soon began to become unpopular when there was a shift from the cognitive theories to a more socio-cognitive view of language learning. Parallel to this development, CALL practitioners soon began exploring computer applications that allowed integrated skills practice and authentic language use (Warschauer & Healey, 1998), hence the emergence of the third phase of computer assisted language learning, Integrative CALL. As part of Integrative CALL, the Internet, due to its diverse and wide potential has also resulted in two other subsets of CALL, which are MOOs (multi-user object oriented domains) and CMC (computer-mediated communication).

As indicated by the growing advances in CALL, it is evident that computers are slowly being assimilated into the classroom and applied in different ways. As such, as stated by Pennington (2001, p.32), teachers of today can no longer "afford to stand back and let IT happen either to them or without them". In reverse, educators should fully utilize the technology that is around them in order to enhance the teaching-learning process.

Teachers' attitudes towards CALL and the emergence of blogs as a powerful tool of language teaching

The exponential developments in computer technology has resulted in two main groups of computer users, digital natives, mainly the younger generation who grew up using technology and are therefore accustomed to it, and the older generation, who are considered as digital immigrants, as they are still actively learning the skills of using technology. Due to this divide, as further impressed upon by Dudeney and Hockly (2007), teachers, who are in a sense considered digital immigrants may have negative attitudes towards using computer technology. This, as further suggested by Dudeney and Hockly (2007), may be attributed to several key factors including the lack of confidence in using the technology, the lack of facilities, the lack of training and also the lack of control of the school situation. Some teachers also, as clarified by Windeatt, Hardisty and Eastment (2000, p.7) fear that the "novelty of using technology may be short-lived" particularly in the case of their own students.

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Therefore, in order to fully realize the potential of computer and information technology in the language classroom, teachers need not only to equip themselves with sufficient skills to utilize this technology, but also to "overcome their personal fears" (Gonzalez, Yawkey & Minaya-Rowe, 2006). As further emphasized by Jones (2001), teachers also need to become more committed to using CALL in the classroom and to explore ways to integrate technology as "tools" and "aids" to the classroom. (Gonzalez, Yawkey & Minaya-Rowe,. 2006)

Computers, as summarized by Hanson-Smith (2001) benefit language teaching and learning as it can not only be used for linguistic analysis and skills acquisition but also as a research tool and a method of increasing motivation and providing opportunities for authentic language use. The Internet, considered as being a more advanced application of Higgin's (1993, p.4) computer networks which only "linked computers through cables in a classroom or lab" is particularly effective in achieving these aims. Among the applications on the Internet include weblogs, "online journals that an individual can continuously update with his or own words" (Campbell 2003, p.1) Although defined as being journals for individuals, blogs have the "capacity to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate" (Hiler, 2003 in Williams & Jacobs 2004, p.232) as there is no specific rules that state that weblogs should only be owned solely by individuals. Therefore, weblogs can be utilized as collaborative projects for students in the language classroom.

As blogs can be accessed with an internet connection, it is, as postulated by Davi, Frydenberg & Gulati, (2007), a convenient way "to engage students in dialogue on the web outside the classroom". Therefore, weblogs have not only the ability to hold students' interest in the class, but also outside the classroom, encouraging continuous language practice. Like the Internet, blogs also provide learners with an authentic audience as it opens the classroom to the wider world and can involve learners in real-life language use.

The Blog Project

Learner profile

The blog project was implemented with 70 first semester students of the Diploma in Business Administration at Sunway College, Johor Bahru. These learners consisted mainly of post-secondary school leavers from the ages 17 to 20. All the learners were Malaysians. As such, it can be assumed that English is a second language for all the participants in this blog project.

Their levels of language proficiency however differed. As the learners from Group A were enrolled into the diploma programme with only a pass in English Language at secondary school level, they were thus regarded as the less proficient group. However, as they were also undergoing the English Enrichment programme concurrently with the Business English module, it was anticipated that they would be able to cope with the content and requirements of this blog project.

The second group of learners were slightly more proficient as they were enrolled into the course with either a credit or distinction in English at secondary school level. However, as demonstrated from random interviews with learners from both groups at the beginning of the module, learners from both groups were equally exposed and familiar with web-based publishing and basic IT skills.

Description of the Blog Project

The blog project was divided into two components, the tutor's blog and the learner's blog. Both blogs were developed over a course of 14 weeks with a range of different tasks being assigned throughout the course.

The tutor's blog

The tutor's blog was developed mainly for updating learners about the tasks and instructions to the tasks. Besides that, additional notes to the different grammatical items learnt during the course were also uploaded on the blog. The trainer also posted additional links and useful guides to language learning on the tutor's blog. Feedback to tasks however was not uploaded on the tutor's blog but to the individual blogs' group comments section.

The learners' blog

Learners from both groups were required to start, develop and maintain blogs as part of their final coursework assessment for their Business English 1 module. The blogs were developed and maintained by groups of learners. To ensure that "real interpersonal interaction" could take place without any one member being "over-reliant on another" (Harmer 2001,p.117), groups were kept small (only 4 or 5 members per group). Learners were also given the freedom to choose their group members.

To ensure that the blogs were regularly updated over the course of 14 weeks, tasks were given based on the chapters of the module course book "New Insights into Business". The task complemented what was learnt in the course book either by functioning as enrichment activities, or supplementary activities, depending on the learners' level of understanding for each topic. As the blog project was considered as a two-pronged approach to constructivism, the tasks that were set focused not only on encouraging students to "construct knowledge from information" they have (cognitive constructivism) but also prioritized the role of "peer support" (social constructivism) in completing the tasks. (Gonzalez, Yawkey & Minaya-Rowe 2006, p.304)

Some of the activities included as part of the blog project were:
1. The development of a group profile for the blog
2. The development of a company profile based on online research
3. The design and recording of a video commercial for Cadbury
4. The writing of a comparison essay of Malaysian and Singaporean consumer habits
5. The development of a comparison chart between benefits to franchisors and franchisees.
6. The presentation of slides based on online research into international business styles
7. The development of an assignment outline
8. The presentation of slides for their assignment
9. The writing of a business plan
10. The writing of a business report
11. The writing of a business memo
12. The preparation of a mind-map based on an online journal articles
13. The reflection on a commercial by Honda.

Blog entries were checked and evaluated weekly by the trainer with feedback posted in the "comments" application on the learners' blog. Learners were also allowed to post comments of their friends' work if they wanted to. This was done either through the "post comments" function on the learners' blogs, or the "Chatbox" application on some of the blogs from Group B.

Research instrument

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the blog in encouraging language learning, I surveyed students' experience, attitudes and perceptions at three stages of the course. Random interviews were conducted in the first week of the blog project to identify the skills and prior knowledge of learners with regards to this particular application. The results from these random interviews were later used as a basis to set tasks and to determine the level of guidance given to the learners during the duration of the blog project.

Two other questionnaires, serving as quantitative methods of data collection were distributed in the 7th week and last week of the 14-week course. The questionnaires distributed covered not only learners' previous experience but also their attitudes towards blogging and issues affecting the implementation of group project blogs in the classroom. For the first questionnaire administered in the seventh week of the course, three areas were prioritized; the learners' previous experience with blogging, the learners' attitudes towards blogging and also the implementation of the blog project in class. Learners were also allowed to give additional comments at the end of the questionnaire.

The second questionnaire, administered in the last week of the course focused on similar key areas including the learners' previous knowledge, learners' attitudes towards blogging, practical considerations of blogging for education and also problems with blogging. Both questionnaires were distributed to all the learners involved in the blog project and its aim was to determine if there were any noticeable changes in terms of attitudes and problems faced when completing the blog project.

Findings

Several key observations were made with regards to the key areas investigated in the two questionnaires.

Learners' previous experience

Both questionnaires and also the oral interview at the beginning of the course revealed that most of the learners are familiar and have read or followed blogs of their peers or family members. However, only about half of the learners actually own personal blogs, and it can be assumed from this observation that although the learners were familiar with blogging, they were not necessarily well-versed with blog applications. This corroborated with the

questionnaire findings that revealed that only about a third of the learners responded positively to being able to use the different blog applications successfully.

With regards to whether the learners have used blogs for educational purposes, only about two-fifths of the learners responded positively. About half of the learners noted that this was their first time using a blog as a language learning activity and project.

Learners' attitudes towards blogging

All the learners responded positively to the idea of blogging being an effective means of learning a language. They attributed this largely to the fact that through blogging, they were given an opportunity to express their thoughts more freely. Almost all the learners also agreed that through blogging, they were motivated to practice more language. This co-related to the results of the questionnaire that showed that nearly three-quarters of the learners felt that blogging made language learning more personalized to them.

Almost all the learners shared the opinion that blogging encouraged team work and peer support; and agreed that blogging made them more participative in class work and also homework. A majority of the learners also preferred to have blogging as part of their course work rather than have a typical written assignment.

Implementation of blogs in the classroom – problems and considerations

Most of the learners admitted that they did face difficulties with the blog project and required more guidance from the teacher. As demonstrated in the differences between the quality of blogs between the learners from Group A and Group B of the same course, it is observed that some of the groups were less skillful in using the different blog applications. As a result, their blogs only had the minimal applications offered by the blog host, www.blogger.com. As some of the learners were also unfamiliar with blogging, it was noted that they found the blog project to be time-consuming.

In terms of problems related to blogging, learners faced the most problems in uploading materials to their blog. Some of the reasons noted for this included the slow speed of connection both at home and at college and also difficulty in formatting their text. For example, some of the learners could not upload their presentation slides as they did not know how to convert the slides into picture files (.jpeg). Others had problems recording their

advertisements or scanning their work as they did not have an available scanner at home or at college.

Learners also commented about the mode of feedback on their blog task. Many agreed that they needed more feedback especially from their peers. They also requested that the lecturer provide overall group feedback on the tutor's blog instead of the learners' blog.

Other issues that were brought up included the level of restriction in terms of content, and also the informal language by some of their peers. Some of the learners also suggested sample tasks to be included into future blog projects including the preparation of comparison charts, mind-maps, web quests and also more online-based research.

Conclusion

As emphasized by Stanley (2005, p.5), weblogs have the ability to capitalize on the "novelty factor" to keep learners not only interested in writing but also to practice and hone their language skills. This has clearly been demonstrated in my blog project with college-level students in the Diploma for Business Administration course. However, it is also necessary for the trainer or the teacher to first provide sufficient guidance on how to use the different blog applications, as indicated in the findings of the questionnaire.

As further emphasized by Jones (2001, p.361), using CALL, or in the case of my research, using blogs in the classroom "requires more learner training and supervision than other self-access pursuits and this has to be carried out by the teacher". It is also noted that although blogs may be considered as learners' personal spaces, if proper learning training is not emphasized at the beginning of a blog project, learners may instead become more reliant and dependent on the teacher (Jones, 2001). Therefore, in order to ensure that blogging for education may be advantageous to the language classroom, the teacher needs to act as a facilitator who is able to not only provide guidance and training to the learners, but also to be able to troubleshoot problem areas and find solutions to this.

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