

## **Blogging: Innovation in an EFL reading and writing class**

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### **Abstract**

Computer-mediated learning tools have promised to be effective educational tools in language classes. This research focused on integrating tutor weblog and learner blogs into reading and writing English classes. This quasi-experimental study was conducted on 57 Iranian freshman high school students at Farzanegan Highschool. Data was obtained through a Likert scale attitude questionnaire and ten open-ended or yes-no questions regarding the effectiveness of Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL). Data were analyzed using Chi-square test with SPSS. The results of data analysis indicated that the vast majority of students found the task of using and creating blogs appealing. They preferred weblog writing to the more traditional ways. Most of them believed that weblogs can improve their reading and writing skills. The students perceived that the interaction and cooperative learning among peers increased due to the blog assignments. This study yielded some practical insights and implications which are presented in this article.

**Keywords:** Weblog, Blogging, Blog-Assisted Language Learning (BALL), Cooperative Learning.

### **1. Introduction**

Computer-mediated learning tools and the Internet are affecting every aspect of education and changing the way we teach and learn. How to take advantage of Internet resources to facilitate language learning is an issue considered in many eloquent articles and publications (Felix, 1999; Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Sperling, 1997; Warschauer, Schetzer & Meloni, 2000). Recent innovations such as

weblogs offer learning opportunities online (Godwin-Jones, 2003). With the advent of push-button publishing, in the shape of the weblog, language teachers now have a new way to entice students to communicate through their reading and writing (Boswood, 1997). Weblogs let the students publish their writings and receive comments from outsiders, potentially leading to discussion and further use of the target language. Indeed, several recent papers have appeared in the literature (Duber, 2002; Campbell, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Johnson 2004; Dieu, 2004; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005) highlighting the possible uses of weblogs for language learning. In principle, a blog is not different from a webpage. However, a blog can be created with the touch of mouse clicks and no experience in web authoring is needed (Wu, 2005). Blogs can help students reflect on their learning and be a rich source of ideas and authentic contemporary language, but strangely, there do not seem as yet to be many EFL blogs (Eastment, 2005, p. 359). The focus of the present research was on 1) exploring the effectiveness of weblogs in enhancing the reading and writing skills of students along with teamwork and interaction among students and 2) identifying the students' perceptions towards weblog usage in their English class and its likely merits or demerits.

## **2. Blog Assisted Language Learning: BALL**

Bloggging started in 1990, and refers to websites that are continuously updated (Blood, 2000). "Blog" is a hypertext product where people can publish their thoughts and receive feedback in a form of links or memos from others in a collaborative space. Fiedler (2003) defines the weblog as a "reflective conversational tool for self-organized learning" (p.190), which best captures the constructivist spirit with which the tool can be used for fostering autonomous, self-directed learning approaches. Blogs enable students to spend more time working with the community where they contribute the content and hence lengthen students contact time with the input writing with others (Repman, Carlson, & Zinskie, 2004; Armstrong & Retterer, 2004). Campbell (2005) states that weblogs can provide a bridge between lessons since teachers can

post materials that recycle and review vocabulary and topics presented during lessons. Research by both Ward (2004) and Campbell (2005) has shown that most students find blogging a positive experience and believe that it helps them to improve their second-language skills. Richardson's study about his K-12 literature class showed that blogs "stimulate debate and motivate students to do close reading of the text" (2003, p. 40).

The concept of cooperative learning is achieved by forming small groups to accomplish a common learning goal (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1998). The weblog, also, can be integrated into class environment, having students work together to achieve a shared learning goal in small groups. As a learning tool, the weblog may be ideal for use in constructivist learning models, by encouraging autonomous, deep, and reflective learning strategies (Fiedler, 2003).

Weblog can also provide the ability to communicate without the inhibitions and preconceptions that accompany most face-to-face interactions. Writing weblog is less formal and less threatening, thus students can write without self-consciousness or inhibition (Roed, 2003). However, there are some problems with the application of the Internet in the classroom including the cost of the equipment needed to connect to the Internet, inequality of access between the haves and have-nots, and frustrating slow connections (Sussex & White, 1996; Warschauer, 2000). Some students' attitudes towards weblogs also differ: "some students loathe blogs for their poor or non-standard English; others love their authenticity and liveliness" (Eastment, 2005, p. 358).

Three types of blogs have been described by Campbell (2003): the tutor blog; the learner blog; and the class blog. The tutor blog is run by the tutor for the learner, and its purpose is to give reading practice to the learners, promote exploration of English websites, encourage online exchange by use of comment buttons, provide class or syllabus information, and serve as a resource of links for self-study. Learner blogs are run by individual learners themselves. Learner blogs are best suited for reading and writing classes. The class blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class.

It can be used for posting messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange and as a forum for students to express opinions, ideas, and interesting information (Campbell, 2003).

### **3. Description of Courses**

This research was carried out in an English class and mostly focused on reading and writing skills. The researcher conducted the whole study in two consecutive courses, i.e. in the fall and spring semesters of 1385-86 educational year (2006-2007). At the beginning of the study, the first course, the participants, 57 female freshman Iranian high school students, aged 15-16, at Farzanegan Highschool in Kashan, were introduced to the course content and to the online environment, (i.e. weblogs linking on the World Wide Web, in which they worked) and the how of the course assessment . Weblog as a piece of technology was incorporated to the course and it served as a means of practicing reading and writing skills. Every student had opportunities to access online at her convenience in or out of the class. The students were expected to work in groups, read the postings on the tutor weblog, and then reflect on the content of the passages via comment buttons. Throughout the whole semester, each student in the group was required to read ten reading passages of her own interest and write ten responses to the readings or her peers' comments. During the course hours, the instructor also observed the students' reading and writing activities and offered assistance whenever needed in completing the course requirements accurately and working together effectively. The students were expected to manage their time well from the beginning of the semester and work steadily on the tutor blog every one or two weeks. They were supposed to hand in the completed work as their class assignments, namely, the titles of the online passages read and commented, at the end of the semester. The teacher evaluated each student's ten online submissions in terms of being intelligible. The students' blog assignments weighed half of their final grade on English course (10 out of 20) and the other half went to the students'

final English exam. The learning took place in the class or in the computer lab reading and commenting on the tutor's blog postings.

Taking advantages of blogs, the coursework aimed to exploit the interactivity and multimedia facilities of computer network to student's foreign language practice. To enable the students to participate more in the blog project with high learning motivation, the second course followed the first course after one month interval. First, a workshop was presented to introduce the learner blog and to assist the students to learn how to make their own blogs. The researcher used a free blogging website (blogger.com) to explain how to create a blog. The students were introduced to a fairly simple process of creating a blog, a three-step-process as explained by the Blogger.com website: 1) create an account; 2) name the blog; and 3) choose a template.

Before setting up their own blogs, the students knew what the course expectations were. Students, individually or in small groups, created their own individual blog for posting assignments. Each student was supposed to submit ten postings to her own blog or ten comments on the tutor or other learner' blogs. Students could read the passages on their friends' blogs or the comments directed at them individually. The teacher could also add comments to the students' submissions. This maximized feedback and contact with all members of the blogging project including the teacher and the students. In addition to reading the passages and writing on the blogs, students could observe how their writing had changed over time. While working on the blog, the students got help from their peers as well as their instructor who monitored the students' writings. The instructor demonstrated how the blogs could be a tool for collaborative efforts in an online learning environment.

#### **4. Research Instrument**

For the purpose of this study, the number and content of ten contributions made by group members in the weblog including the online responses to the readings in both courses were analyzed in terms of intelligibility and clearness of the content and scored by the researcher (one point for each contribution). Students' writings

were not evaluated in terms of mechanics, discourse, and syntax since students were at the elementary level of language proficiency and their writings comprised a few short sentences. Besides, most of the work on the tutor weblog including readings and writings was done cooperatively by group members accompanied with the teacher's assistance in the computer lab.

An attitude questionnaire, comprising 30 questions, was developed pertinent to the students' experiences with online posts. In order to eradicate any possible misunderstanding or confusion on the side of the subjects, the questionnaire items were written in Persian and read out to the class by the researcher herself while administering. The questionnaire was cross-checked by two experts to ensure the clarity of the items. For the first 20 items on the instrument, the participants were asked to respond on a five-point Likert type scale which ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" and for the second 10 open-ended or yes-no questions the students freely expressed their perceptions of and attitude towards the use of weblog in their English course.

### 5. Findings and Discussion

In order to assign the degree of positive attitude towards the use of weblog as a learning tool in the English class, a Chi-square was run on the number of binary responses (strongly agree or agree) to the corresponding items in the questionnaire. The results showed that students favored the use of weblogs. Table 1 shows the results of the chi-square.

**Table1:** Chi-square Test for students' perceptions of weblog

Choices	1	2	3	4	5	Chi-square	Sig.
Frequency	58	164	71	441	406	X <sup>2</sup> = 590.781	.000
	strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	strongly agree	agree		

df =4      X<sup>2</sup>-critical=9.487      p<.05

1=strongly disagree    2=disagree    3= undecided    4=agree    5= strongly agree

Further, to explore the effectiveness of weblog in enhancing the reading and writing skills of students and identifying the students'

perceptions towards weblog usage in their English class, the students' responses to the items of the questionnaire were tabulated and summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table2:** Students' reactions towards blogging (N=57)

Statements	S.DIS. 1	DIS. 2	UN.D. 3	A. 4	S.A. 5	Mean	S.D.
1.I like blogs.	0	3	3	28	28	4.25	.786
2.I believe blogs are interactive.	1	8	2	26	20	3.98	1.061
3.The blog assignment was academically valuable to me.	3	9	4	28	13	3.68	1.152
4.I see blogs as a way to express myself.	7	6	25	19	57	3.98	.973
5.Blogs are a credible source of information.	0	12	5	24	16	3.77	1.086
6.I like to use weblogs in my English class.	2	5	1	19	30	4.23	1.086
7.Reading the postings on the blog can improve my reading skill.	1	3	3	26	24	4.21	.901
8.Writing (commenting ) on the blog postings can improve my writing skill.	0	6	1	25	25	4.21	.921
9.I like blog assignments to be part of my English class assignments.	2	10	1	22	22	3.91	1.199
10.Blog assignments increase my language ability.	1	7	4	24	21	4.00	1.052
11.Scores on the blog assignments increases my total score on my English course compared with that of the previous terms.	5	11	6	20	15	3.51	1.311
12.Reading the blog improves my English vocabulary knowledge.	1	9	3	25	19	3.91	1.090
13.The use of blogs increases my knowledge about computers and technology.	2	8	1	20	26	4.05	1.171
14.Blogs help me to use the Internet more efficiently.	2	6	2	20	27	4.12	1.119
15.I prefer writing on the blog to writing on paper.	7	10	5	12	23	3.60	1.474
16.I like to keep on working on blogs in my English class	4	5	5	19	24	3.95	1.231
17.Links on blogs are sources of self - study.	1	4	10	26	16	3.91	.950

18.I like the postings on my tutor's blogs.	0	1	0	28	28	4.46	.600
19.Reading and writing on blogs are time-consuming.	6	13	4	20	14	3.40	1.361
20.Blogs do not enhance my English language skills.	20	27	5	4	1	1.93	.942

1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3= undecided 4=agree 5= strongly agree

As Table 2 reveals, a great majority of the students (90%) liked blogs. Students perceived that blogs are interactive means of learning (81%) and they stated that blog assignments were academically valuable to them (72%), i.e. blogging increased the students' reading and writing skills (87%), their vocabulary knowledge (77%), and their computer and technology skills (81%). Many students liked to use weblogs in their English class (86%) and they expressed their desire to keep on working on blogs in their English class (75%). To students, the blog was a credible source of information (70%) as well as a source of self study (74%). They found that the blog made the course more interesting and it helped them talk to their classmates more. Finally, a large percentage of the students hoped that because they used the blog for their English course, they would get a better grade on this course (61%). Finally, in order to make sure that students were not just circling numbers on the questionnaire mindlessly, a negative statement was included among the items (i.e., blogs do not enhance my English language skills) and the overwhelming majority of the students disagreed with this statement (82%).

## 6. Students' Comments

What follows presents the results of the response analysis to these ten open-ended or yes-no questions:

1. *How was the blogging experience for you?*
2. *What did you like about the blog project?*
3. *What did you dislike about the blog project?*
4. *Which kind of postings (stories) did you like to read more?*
5. *Will you continue to blog after this course? Why?*
6. *Will you continue commenting on your teacher's blogs? Why?*

7. *Do you like to keep on working on your own blogs?*
8. *Are you an active blogger?*
9. *Will you invite your friends to read your blog postings?*
10. *Which one do you like more: reading and writing on the teacher's blog, or letting everyone to have her own blog?*

Analyzing the students' answers to the questions pertinent to the tutor or learner blog experience, the researcher came up with some initial themes. Overall, the students' blogging experiences can be grouped into positive and negative feelings about the use of weblogs. Most students felt positively towards their blogging experiences because they felt that blogging aided them in thinking and learning, the blog environment offered a space outside of the class where they could work on their own, and a sense of community among peers was created. The students were excited to be able to experience a new kind of technology and to understand and tap its potential for their own future interests. The students also liked learning English and computer skills at the same time. They thought that weblogs supported their learning by pushing them to think more critically about reading materials.

Apart from the positive feelings associated with the use of weblogs, the students also expressed some doubts. Many students complained that they had too much homework in this course and that it took them a long time to complete their weblog assignments (60%). For some, it was their first introduction to such technology, and they experienced cognitive difficulties, which in turn resulted in stressful experiences for some students. The fact that the weblogs were a part of class requirement and their contributions would be graded at the end of the class exerted some amount of pressure on these students. Thus, they engaged in the activities only for the purpose of meeting the class requirement.

The students' answers to these questions "How was your blogging experience?" and "What did you like or dislike about the blog project?" (Questions 1, 2, & 3) can be categorized as good and bad experience:

**1. Good experience:**

- *I learned a lot because I was able to study English, read my teachers' postings on her weblog, and comment on the postings.*
- *We can exchange our thoughts through it.*
- *I could write my own thinking in English when commenting. It was hard, but I think my writing skill improved.*
- *I enjoyed being able to write freely.*
- *I could improve my English writing skills.*
- *Bloggng improved my English knowledge level.*
- *I learned how to make a blog.*
- *I had good experience.*

**2. Bad experience:**

- *When I was busy, I couldn't read the postings and comment on them.*
- *I didn't have access to the internet at home. So I couldn't hand in my blog assignments in due time.*
- *It was difficult because I had some technical problems with my PC.*
- *It was time-consuming.*
- *I wrote in the blog for the sake of doing homework.*
- *I feel pressured to keep up with reading posts and comment on them. This led to stress and in some cases frustration.*

Stories with themes related to God, morals, jokes, and new scientific news accompanied with nice photos drew the students' attention and motivated them to do the reading and commenting (Question 4). The same major problem, *lack of time*, was reiterated by the students when they were asked whether they would keep on blogging and commenting on the weblogs (Questions 5, 6, & 7). In spite of the fact that a great majority of the students liked blogs and recommended their usage in English class (85%), fifty percent of the students expressed their inclination to blog in the future.

When the students were asked, "Having experienced the blog assignment, would you keep on working on blogging in the future if

the activity were purely for formative purposes (i.e. it did not count at all towards the formal assessment for the class)?" (Question 5), half of the students agreed with the statement. Some of the reasons given by those who did not agree with the statement were: "no educational value", "it was too difficult (technically)", "not interesting", and "too-time consuming." Although a large majority of the students did not have any prior experience with blogs, this new experience for their EFL course was so appealing.

Experiencing the blogging for the first time, most of the students were not confident enough to consider themselves as active bloggers. Seventy three percent of the students liked to work on their blogs and invite their friends to read their own blog postings (Questions 8 & 9) although they had their doubts as to whether their peers would put any comments on their blogs. The students equally liked working on both the tutor and the learner blogs (Question 10).

Along with the students' reflections on their BALL course, the instructor also experienced this new great chance. The blog assignments provided the instructor with the opportunity to include a lot of reading materials. If these passages were just given to students to read, it might have been perceived as a lot to do. However, with the help of blogs, it was ensured that each student read at least ten postings. The comment part of the blog assignment also ensured they reflected on the passages read. On the whole, the students' overall enthusiasm and satisfaction with the use of weblog outweighed any technical or other difficulties they might have encountered during the course. This positive attitude towards the use of weblogs was also confirmed quantitatively via administering an attitude questionnaire and running a Chi-square ( $\chi^2$  observed=590.781 >  $\chi^2$  critical= 9.478,  $p < .05$ ). Blogs have immense potential as an extremely valuable tool for the teaching of second language reading and writing. Students can read comments for the class as a whole and comments directed at them individually. This maximizes feedback and contact with the teacher. Students can observe how their writing has changed over time (Johnson, 2004).

## **7. Conclusion**

Blogs have immense potential as an extremely valuable tool for the teaching of second language reading and writing. By utilizing free blogging services on the Internet, teachers are capable of creating and storing online supplemental materials for students, post class notes for student review, and give general feedback to the class as a whole and individually. Additionally, students are able to submit assignments online. Taught in a computer lab with Internet access, a writing class utilizing blogs that allows students to actually write in class on a computer can be created. The results of this study suggest that BALL can enhance an EFL course taught in a traditional classroom; however, “one important requirement for realizing the promise of new educational technologies is to use them to create new learning and teaching environments that are more effective and exciting for at least some kinds of materials rather than merely trying to replicate the traditional classroom electronically” (Hiltz, 1986, p. 104). Weblogging is no panacea for writing instruction, but this study has convinced the researcher that weblogging as a writing activity is worth pursuing in highschool or college courses, and that understanding the wide range of generic knowledge students bring to weblogging will help instructors orient and motivate students in the use of weblogs. Blogging gives students the chance to develop a range of literacies: students practice reading and writing, they improve their computer skills, and they learn to work collaboratively with their peers. The results of this study affirmed that students consider the weblog as a useful tool to supplement in-class instruction. The students deemed it appropriate to learn English through tutor or students’ weblogs. Satisfaction with the weblog outweighed dissatisfaction due to difficulties accessing the net and commenting or reading passages. Spending too much time and getting disconnected were perceived as the main problems for the students to complete their assignment. To compensate for these difficulties the students encountered, the easiest solution can be more time allotment to English language courses.

This research yielded the following insights which may lead to further research or development in teaching practices. First,

weblogs can be used in English classes for enhancing language skills. Second, weblogging can enhance students' motivation due to the novelty and diversity of possible learning activities. Third, blogging is an enjoyable activity, which attracts the vast majority of students who are keen on having their own website. Fourth, teachers can provide individual feedback for individual learners, and learners can receive feedback from classmates or any Internet reader. Orienting learners toward personal publishing on weblogs can help prepare them for communication in the networked world.

Based on the results of this study, weblogs could be particularly effective in education as a way for teachers to share primary sources of information with their students, model good writing, and provide deeper commentary on issues being studied. Likewise, weblogs in students' hands provide them with a place to practice their writing skills, try on expressing new ideas, and get a sense of what their peers think about a specific topic. A weblog can be an excellent place for students to hone their writing skills. With a well-organized instructional design, a blog definitely is a plus to English teacher.

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