

# Application of Blogging for Learner Development

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## Abstract

Learner development depends to a great extent on language awareness which is not only a focus on language itself, but also a cognitive reflection upon language functions. Language awareness can be fostered by giving learners various choices in learning activities. The variety of choices stimulates learner interest and has a potential for learner development.

This research addresses the application of the latest innovation of Information Communication Technology, which has been coined blogging, for fostering language awareness. A weblog, or blog for short, is a personal site that allows instant publishing online. An increasing interest to using blogs in education suggests their application in teaching / learning English. In this study, students created their own blogs and used them for accomplishing various activities. The implications of blog application in learner development have been discussed.

## Introduction

Recent innovations of e-learning include weblogs which can serve as a valuable tool for teaching writing in a foreign language. The advantages of blogging in language classes comprise instant publishing online, awareness of having a readership, extra reading practice, and creating an online portfolio of student written work.

In this study we describe research into application of weblogs for raising language awareness in learners at tertiary level. This research documents the effects of learner self-assessment of language proficiency, experience of online listening and writing an opinion essay on professional theme. Language awareness is raised by learner reflections on written work and experience in remedial work. The implications of blogging on learner development are discussed.

## Review of blogging in language learning

Application of ICT in language learning has become very popular. However, teachers “must look at technology as integral to providing learning experiences that focus on authentic and applicable language and content, that are differentiated according to learner needs, and that support learners in developing literacy across situations” (Egbert, 2006).

Recent innovation such as weblogs may be less familiar but it offers learning opportunities online (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Blogging does not require any knowledge of HTML. Blog entries are usually followed by a comment button, allowing readers to write a response, which is then logged and linked, along with all other comments, into the original text. Blogs are easily linked and cross-linked, to create larger on-line communities. Language learners can use a personal blog as an electronic portfolio that shows development over time. By publishing the blog online, the student has the possibility of writing for readers beyond classmates. Readers in turn can comment on what they have read. Weblog entries are made by typing directly into the browser and with the click of a button are instantly published on the Internet. Bloggers can extend their ability to customize the layout of their blog, e.g. add pictures to enhance its attractiveness.

Three types of blogs are described (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. The learner blogs can be run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners. 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 (Campbell, 2003).

Perception of blogs differs: some students loathe blogs for their poor or non-standard English, others love their authenticity and liveliness (Eastment, 2005:358). 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, 2005:359).

Reasons for using blogs are numerous (Stanley, online): 1) – to provide a real audience for student writing, 2) – to provide extra reading practice for students, 3) – to increase the sense of community in a class, 4) – to encourage students to participate, 5) – to stimulate out-of-class discussion, 6) – to create an online portfolio of student written work (Stanley, online). Novelty factor creates student interest in starting to use blogs. It is claimed that blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. If learners are not encouraged, blogs can quickly be abandoned.

Although not originally intended for use in EFL classes, blogs have great potential as an extremely valuable tool for the teaching skills of writing. By using free blogging services on the Internet, teachers can create and store online supplemental materials for students and give feedback individually or to the class. Blogs are a versatile tool with abundant applications.

The features of successful blog-based class (Johnson, 2004): must be a blog for class notes and a blog for posting group feedback; blogs must be viewed by all students; students must have their own individual blogs for posting assignments; only the teacher and the student can view the individual blog; the teacher can add comments to student's submissions, but not vice versa; the blogging service must be free. Weblogs provide a chance to prepare students for a networked world where communication is essential. Blogging is a good way of expressing one's opinions and having an audience.

According to J. Walker (2005), most of students by the end of the semester said they had enjoyed blogging and found it valuable. Some of students wrote with great enthusiasm and adapted the templates daily to reflect new skills and new aspirations. Some students absolutely hated being forced to blog. Most of the students stopped blogging when the semester was over, but about 20% continued (Walker, 2005).

Learner attitudes to weblogs were also researched by A. P. Campbell (online) by administering the anonymous survey to 57 learners (31 females, 26 males) in four classes. The summary of his data is as follows. The large majority (86%) feel that the blog is 'OK' or 'good', most of them only rarely or sometimes read the entries, preferring instead to go straight to the class websites for homework or presentation information. Learners' preference seems to do what is required of them. This assumption is reinforced by decreasing numbers of learners following links in the entries and making comments. Majority (95%) are rarely or never utilizing the EFL learning resources available for self-study via permanent links in the margins of a weblog. Although most learners recognized the value of a blog, they claimed that they didn't have the time to take advantage of it. Almost every learner recognized the value of the blog as a learning opportunity, but many stated that lack of time was the main inhibiting factor.

Good and bad points of blogs application have been reviewed by J. M. Hall (online). Good points can be summarized as follows: students' reactions to the blogs were generally positive; the majority of students were very diligent in posting to their blogs; students were able to read each other's opinions and observations; the instructor received invaluable feedback from the students about class activities; class members were able to share differing opinions freely. There were a lot of very tastefully designed blogs. A third of the students, although new to blogging, really picked it up fast. Bad points about blogs: entries were often written for the sake of completing an assignment; students commented less and less on each other's blogs as the semester progressed; some of the student's blogs were virtually ignored by their classmates; many students did not have computers at home; other problems include forgotten passwords, usernames, and e-mail addresses; a few students never took to blogging and rarely posted; it was difficult to keep track of all the blogs; blogs soon become outdated and discontinued after the class ends.

Teaching writing and reading ESP through weblogs was studied in (Arani, 2005), who maintains that approximately three quarters of the class of forty students preferred writing the weblog to the more traditional written journal; most students believed that the weblog can improve English; seven disagreed; 15 students said that they would

definitely continue using the weblog; 15 said they definitely would not, and 10 were unsure.

Learner development is directly related with the language awareness. In particular, language awareness is essential in writing because it refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language (Carter, 2003:64). Language awareness does not simply involve a focus on language, it also implies cognitive reflection upon language. In order to raise language awareness learners must be constantly given choices.

Choices should include a diversity of activities and cater for learner multiple intelligencies. Self-awareness can be successful if learners keep reflecting on their learning. For this purpose reflections on various activities including portfolios and self-assessment questionnaires can bring satisfying results. Questionnaires draw attention to new factors that can facilitate and enhance learning and make learners reflect upon the learning process.

In this study, we encouraged learners to think about their performance in class activities through the application of blogging for accomplishing various assignments.

### **Participants and research methods**

The participants have been the university students who study English for Specific Purposes. There have been three groups that participated in this project, and the total number of respondents has been 33.

Research employed a questionnaire designed in accordance with scientific standards (Z. Dornyei, 2003:16). The questionnaire aimed at establishing students' judgments on their experience at blogging. It is presented in the Appendix.

### **Results and discussion**

#### **Creation of weblogs**

The first step was a creation of individual blogs. We have employed a free service available online <http://www.blogger.com>. Fortunately, our English language classroom is equipped with computers, and there was no difficulty in creating personal blog for each participant.

Students' blogs have been downloaded to the teachers' weblogs <http://anusienelilija.blogspot.com> and <http://mazeikiene.blogspot.com>, respectively. All blogs are also available through the project initiator's & coordinator's weblog <http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com>. Therefore any learner's blog can be entered by clicking on his / her surname, and all entries can be viewed or commented on.

Majority of participants declined the idea of personalizing their weblogs, i.e. providing her / his profile, although some students did: they contributed nice pictures of themselves, their pets or flowers. Thus, profile of bloggers in most cases remains uncovered. We avoided pressing learners into going too personal in order to give them

time and space and to get accustomed to the novel online activities. The various assignments were carried out during consecutive classes.

### Self-assessment of language skills and performance

The first assignment was self-assessment of language skills and performance in class activities. Learners were requested to evaluate their proficiency by writing the first entry in individual blogs. They were also asked to give themselves a mark on 5 to 10 grade scale: 10 – excellent, 9 – very good, 8 – good, 7 – adequate, 6 – satisfactory, 5 – weak. Self-assessment grades were not recorded in blogs, though. Students were requested to write the grades on paper slips. This has been done in order to preserve one’s self-esteem.

The self-assessment data are shown in Table 1. The numbers in columns show the percentage of respondents that judged their skills by awarding themselves an appropriate grade. Skills of reading are assessed favorably probably because it is easy to conceal flaws in reading comprehension. It can be seen that listening, writing, and speaking skills are judged differently: nobody feels they excel at them, and students give themselves lower grades for these activities. This learners’ feedback is very valuable for teachers who wish to plan classroom work that benefits students best.

Table 1. Learners’ judgments of language skills. 33 respondents.

Language skills	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average	Satisfactory
Reading	12%	65%	23%	-	-
Listening	-	24%	29%	35%	12%
Writing	-	18%	41%	41%	-
Speaking	-	29%	35%	18%	18%

Learners’ self-assessment of performance in vocabulary tests, presentations and class discussions is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Learners’ judgments of their performance in class activities. 33 respondents.

Language skills	Excellent	Very good	Good	Average	Satisfactory
Vocabulary	-	29%	29%	42%	-
Presentations	29%	29%	42%	-	-
Discussions	6%	29%	18%	29%	18%

As it can be seen in Table 2, no students have given themselves excellent grades for knowledge of ESP vocabulary. However performance in presentations is evaluated higher. It stands to reason: presentations are prepared in advance, and students are more successful in making ‘ready-made’ speeches. Evaluation of performance in discussions is more modest: speaking impromptu in front of the audience is never an easy task, particularly for shy students. This is the reason for scattered evaluation of ability to take part in class discussions.

### Task of listening online

The second assignment included individual online listening to recordings by a famous British linguist, Professor David Crystal. These recordings go under the title 'Keep Your English Up To Date', and now are available at the BBC language learning website

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1728\\_uptodate/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1728_uptodate/)

There are 26 recordings on this website altogether. Each student was requested to choose two recordings to her / his liking, listen to them as many times as necessary for complete comprehension, then simultaneously read the tape-script, which is available for each theme, and listen again. Finally, students had to describe their listening experience in individual weblogs. The unusual feature of this exercise was the lack of ear-phones at each computer in the classroom. Therefore, as learners chose to listen to different recordings at the same time, the 'noise' in the classroom hindered the audibility. In teachers' opinion, such interference resembles to some extent real-life listening environment and provides conditions for learners to relax, concentrate on their own task, and not to worry for not being able to follow everything immediately. Each learner's description of this experience can be viewed in her / his individual blogs. Some of learners are aware of usefulness of such listening practice, although others prefer ideal listening conditions, i.e. complete silence in the classroom. Such an experiment of individualized listening allows learners to work at their own pace, make choices for themselves, improve their listening skills as well as heighten their awareness of cultural issues through listening. Knowing that a skill of listening is much to be desired for many learners, individualized listening practice is a must in class settings.

### **Writing opinion essays and comments**

The third assignment comprised writing an opinion essay on one of the suggested ESP themes such as Human Rights, Freedom of Speech and Expression, The Law and the Family. Written essays can be viewed and judged on in students' blogs. It is worth noting that some students have written extensively and expressed interesting ideas, but some have just mentioned trivial things without giving deeper insights into the topic. This just shows a particular learner's attitude to accomplishing assignments.

The fourth assignment included reading peers' blogs and writing comments. Surprisingly, some learners turned to their native language in this task. Overall everybody was positive about peers' entries. There have not been any critical remarks or negative comments. Students are obviously aware of the public nature of their publication and avoid being critical or categorical in their judgments.

It should also be noted that not every participant of the project accomplished all assignments. The major reason was students' truancy. We did not expect learners to do the assignments in their spare time, although some students, who failed to complete tasks in class, volunteered to do it as homework tasks. Another common drawback was forgotten usernames and passwords that only owners of weblogs were supposed to know. Without retrieving this information the blogger is unable to enter the editing pages of his / her weblog, and therefore to update it, i.e. to change or add extra information. This drawback was observed by J. M. Hall (online) and described in the literature review.

## **Analysis of written work**

The analysis of students' writing has been performed at the end of the weblog project. Here we will have a quick look at the systematic nature of errors and examine some sources of learner errors.

Generally speaking, errors can be divided into 'interlingual errors', i.e. errors that occur between English and the mother tongue, and 'intralingual errors', i.e. those that occur within the language being learned (Bolitho & Tomlinson, 2005). Amongst the causes of the errors are the mother tongue interference, overgeneralization, interference from items within English - cross association and false analogy. Errors might not only have one of the causes, there could be two or more causes operating at the same time.

Errors made by the students do not demonstrate any difficulties in understanding the course material. It makes an impression that many errors are made because of students' carelessness or thoughtlessness. A number of spelling errors have been observed: a) personal pronoun "I" and words – "English", "British", "American" are not written in capital letters; b) some plural nouns ending in "y" – e.g. summaries. Other common errors are missing articles, confusing the usage of the possessive case, missing –s in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular in present Simple, misused double negatives, misplaced apostrophes, subject-verb disagreement, usage of wrong prepositions and tenses; confused vocabulary, misuse of infinitive and "to be". Quite often, one thing was written, but another thing was meant. These errors have been due to the mother tongue interference. Word order mistakes are also frequent, and they are caused by the fact that word order in students' mother tongue is rather flexible. It should be noted that both intralingual and interlingual errors have been encountered in the analyzed writing, and moreover, they are typical of Lithuanian learners of English.

Knowledge of the causes can help teachers to help the learner. When teachers are aware of the problem that the learner faces they are in a better position to decide what to do about it. The action teachers take can depend on a lot of different variables: whether the error is frequent or not, if it is important for communication or not, whether it takes place in a controlled or uncontrolled activity, if it is an individual problem or widespread amongst the group (Bolitho & Tomlinson, 2005).

Having analyzed the students' writing assignments, we have written our comments in each learner's blog and asked students to correct their errors. The remedial work was supposed to have been done by learners in the same section of comments, so that everybody can see how diligently learners have done it. It is well known that generally students dislike doing remedial work on paper assignments. The reason is quite simple: students are only interested in grades and many do not even bother to read teacher's remarks. In this experiment, grades have not been awarded yet so learners have been motivated to do their best in correcting their writing. Grades for taking part in this project and accomplishing assignments will be awarded before the end of the semester. Naturally, each student will be graded depending on her / his actual performance.

## Final phase of research

Final phase of research comprised two parts: first, the analysis of students' responses to the Questionnaire and, second, the teachers' online feedback, which was given in the form of comments on each learner's written assignments.

Learners' responses to Likert scale questions on scale 1 to 5 (1 - strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – not sure, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree) allow to calculate the Means, Standard Deviations, and frequencies of optional choice. The obtained data are shown in Table 3

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations and Frequencies of Responses on Likert Scale.

Item on the questionnaire	Like rt Mean	Likert Standar d Deviation	Frequen cy strongly disagree	Frequen cy disagree	Frequen cy not sure	Frequen cy agree	Frequen cy strongly agree
1) writing & publishing online is useful	3.93	0.88	-	3.5%	11%	61%	21%
2) online listening is helpful	3.96	1.18	7%	3.5%	18%	28.5%	43%
3) reading blogs & writing comments is beneficial	3.96	0.82	3.5%	-	21%	64%	14%
4) writing online essays is useful	3.89	0.72	-	7%	11%	68%	14%
5) I'll use my blog in the future	3.39	0.74	-	7%	57%	25%	11%

On average, respondents rated items 2 (listening online) and 3 (reading other people's blogs and writing comments) favorably: Means for both items are the highest in comparison to other items. However, Standard Deviations differ: 1.18 and 0.82. The former indicates a higher scatter than the latter. Online listening is supported by 71.5% of respondents (28.5% agree and 43% strongly agree). Online reading and commenting is favored by 78% of students (64% agree and 14% strongly agree). The Means for writing and publishing online (item 1 in Table 3) and for writing online essays (item 4) are close: 3.93 and 3.89, although Standard Deviation (SD) for the item 1 is higher (0.88) than for the item 4 (0.72). The higher value of SD signifies larger spread. Positive attitude to these questions is shared by the same number of

students - 82% (61% agree, 21% strongly agree with the item 1, and 68% agree, 14% strongly agree with the item 4, respectively).

The most interesting responses have been obtained on the future use of blogs (item 5 in Table 3). The Mean is just 3.39, i.e. the smallest value in this Table, but the SD is not large, just 0.74. Over half of respondents (57%) are not sure they will use blogs in the future, although the frequency of positive responses is 36% (25% agree, and 11% strongly agree). This result is better than reported by A. P. Campbell or J. M. Hall probably due to the fact that we diversified the blogs activities, and learners have not been bored with them yet. As it has been mentioned at the beginning of this article, adding variety to class activities and giving learners choices in learning stimulates motivation and interest.

Second part in final analysis is feedback. Teachers' feedback has been provided individually by writing comments in each learner's weblog. Teachers' attitude to writing comments was straightforward: be as positive as possible, concise, up to the point and avoid harsh remarks. It is well known that students are usually interested in their grade and quite often do not read teachers' remarks on paper written assignments. In blogging, there were no grades awarded, but learners were aware that their blogs can be viewed by any Internet browser or member of public. Therefore students did their best to make their blogs presentable. Regrettably, remedial work (error correction in the comments section of a blog) has not been done by all project participants. The usual excuse that students make is that it has to be done outside classroom hours at the end of the semester, when students are very busy preparing for exams and credits.

### **Conclusions and implications of research**

The extent to which learners consciously focus on aspects of language and the degree of noticing its particular features are debated by linguists and practitioners. This study documents the ways of raising language awareness that is important for language processing and learner development.

In the presentation of our results, we outline the opportunities for raising language awareness by employing an ICT technique which allows learners to carry out assignments at their own pace and under non-threatening conditions. The online methodology involves creating an individual weblog by each student and using it for describing her / his own experience of learning English and accomplishing written assignments.

The assignments of self-assessment, online listening, and writing an opinion essay and comments on peers' weblogs have been employed in this study. Learners' self-assessment of productive and receptive language skills has indicated weaknesses in acquisition of writing and listening. Students' descriptions of assignments in their blogs allowed us to analyze their written work, provide feedback in the form of comments and encourage learners to do remedial work in the comment areas. Individual online listening at one's own pace prompts and motivates learners to improve skills of listening without being intimidated by possible failure.

The implications of this research are numerous. First, application of weblogs in English for Specific Purposes classes has proved useful for raising language awareness and learner development. Second, learners enjoy being given choices of various learning activities. Third, due to the novelty and diversity of class activities, students' motivation is enhanced. Finally, online writing and publishing for the audience make students reflect on their performance.

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**Appendix. Questionnaire. Application of weblogs for learning English.**

1 Writing and publishing online is useful for improving writing skills. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

2 Individual listening to authentic English recordings online is helpful for developing listening skills. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

3 Reading other people's blogs and writing comments is beneficial to raising language awareness. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

4 Writing an opinion essay on the ESP theme online is beneficial for consolidating professional knowledge. a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

5 I will continue to use my blog in the future: a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.