Title
A weblog as a Tool for Reflection for English Language Learners
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Teachers have reported a number of benefits for language learners keeping blogs; however, none of the available research focuses on the potential for a blog to be a medium for reflecting on learning. This paper draws on preliminary data collected from male and female Iranian college students. Forty students kept voluntary blogs in their free time throughout a semester they spent. The students usually wrote about everyday activities, but they also used their blogs to write their reflections about their language learning. In particular, the students discussed feelings about their exam results, occasions when they were disappointed in their spoken English, goals that they set for themselves and ways in which their classroom learning helped them in everyday situations. The findings suggest that blogs could be one tool for teachers to use in order to encourage students to reflect on their learning.

Introduction

Appearance of new technologies has an enormous effect on all levels of human life and education which also have been affected by these technologies. Internet and its facilities have the most effect in relate to other technologies. Weblogs are one of the popular technologies that have been developed in these years. In the first time, it didn't developed because of education, but it also have been applied in education and higher education and today many of the teachers use them to improve their teaching and maybe we could call that as a teaching tool in education. Constructing weblogs could motivate students to write and do research and also read other person researches, then these activities giving students a platform to explore and analyze the various internet materials they gain both independently out of the class and in the classroom (Oravec, 2003).

Weblogs as useful tools for language learners have been reported effective. Authentic writing practice (Brooks, Nechols and Preibe, 2004), an opportunity to recycle language learned in class (Pinkman, 2005), and an alternative way to communicate with teachers and learners, all could be provided through weblogs. Developing audience awareness (Palfreyman, 2004a; Ward,2004), creating a collaborative class environment(Barrios,2003; Haffaker,2004) have also been reported to be a motivating learning activity(Brooks,Nechols and

Preibe,2004;Pinkman,2005;Ward,2004). Although little research supports this claim, there are ways in which blogs also have the potential to promote learner autonomy.

Little (1991) defines learner autonomy as a "capacity"- for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (Little 1991, p4). It is likely that such capacity could be developed through these opportunities. First, learners demonstrate 'independent action' by assuming the responsibility for the ownership of their writing as they are producing a publicly accessible document and this is different from the work produced for the teacher in order to receive a grade (Lowe and Williams, 2004).Ward (2004) reported that second language learners in his study in the Middle East appreciated having the opportunity to review their blog and correct mistake they has made. Also authors have to decide about the content they display on the blogs. Ward (2004) reported that the freedom to choose topics and expressing the student's personal views were best liked about weblog assessment.

Hand-written journals have had a place in the language classroom for a long time, providing free, unstructured writing practice and a medium of communication for students who have difficulties expressing themselves orally. These journals also give students opportunities to reflect and describe their learning and to develop strategy awareness (Oxford et.al., 1996) and metacognitive awareness (Palfreyman, 2005b). Similarly, blogs may also offer opportunities for students to critically reflect on their learning with the additional motivating factors of writing for a real audience (Ward, 2004) and using technology in a motivating way (Brooks, Nichols and Priebe, 2004; Ward, 2004). Yang et. al. (2005) note that an electronic exchange of ideas with peers can be motivating and can also provide opportunities for strengthening critical-thinking skills.

People don't learn merely from observing an action conducted by someone else, or simply from a deposit of knowledge from one person to the other. Individuals need to engage in the activity and in a communicative dialogue to learn and create meaning of all new information whether it concerns everyday life issues or the articulation of complex academic papers. It is not until we bring our ideas to our consciousness that we are able to evaluate them and decide how we want to use them (Boud, Keogh& Walker, 1985). Individual reflection is an important educational strategy to assist in developing the intellectual insight of students, and to promote the critical thinking skills that are necessary in order to fully comprehend novel information (Fernheimer, Wendy and Nelson, 2005). In our idea using weblog assistant to student thinking by engaging those in content and by encounter them with problems.

It is claimed that blogging influences the way you "think about thinking" (Mortensen and Walker, 2002, p. 254). Brooks, Nichols and Priebe (2004) conducted a study with native speakers in a first year composition course in the United States. Over time, as student awareness and interest in weblogging increased, daily reflection appeared to be the defining characteristic of the blog.

Expressing themselves in a private blog allows writers to develop their own voice (Brooks, Nichols and Priebe, 2004; Mortensen and Walker, 2002). An idea expressed in a blog can trigger a train of thought either by the original author or by his or her readers (Mortensen and Walker, 2002). Rebecca Blood is one of the first people to have kept a blog and has produced a history of weblogs. She mentions two unexpected advantages of her own blogging experience. The first is that she learned more about herself through blogging, and the second was that through regular blogging she came to value her own opinion (Blood, 2000). Foreign language students need to draw on previously learned language in order to write a blog entry, which means that they are very likely to be reflecting on their understanding of the language as they compose their blog entries. Limited research has been published related to non-native speakers' blogs that investigate the issue of reflection. This paper offers some observations based on a preliminary study conducted with female and male Iranian college students.

Study

Background

40 female and male students of EFL voluntarily participated in this study. Students had intermediate level of English. The students had been accustomed to keeping written journals in English. For this study, they continued this practice in their free time and without any grade in the form of weblogs during the second semester. Students had to keep the blog in ways that show their activities and aspects of their lives. The blogs acted as an informal way for students and teachers to communicate and to write about their everyday events. Students were free in terms of length and frequency of entries. The purpose of the current research study was to establish whether students used these voluntary blogs as a tool for unprompted reflection.

Methods

The purpose of the present research study is to understand more about whether blogs could be a tool that students might naturally use to reflect on their learning. In order to do this, the following research question was established: *did the students use their blogs to reflect on their learning?*

A category analysis of the content of the students' blogs was conducted in order to identify evidence of reflection in what students had written. The researcher performed the analysis according to the topics discussed by the students in their blogs using a grounded theory approach (see Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In a grounded theory approach, instead of data being placed into predetermined categories, the categories emerge from the data and are coded. This approach meant that one blog posting might contain numerous separate topics.

Findings and discussion

Using a grounded theory approach, the following categories emerged from the forty student blogs (table 1 and chart 1).

Code	Topic	Number of topics	% total of postings
FrA	Activity with friends	98	25
FaA	Activity with family	60	17
I/E	Comparing Iranian with English	30	8
RES	Reflecting on English skills	75	16
RSA	Reflecting on study abroad	21	4
CA	Class activity	40	10
CT	Class trip	8	2
SI	Self-introduction	10	4
FP	Future plan	35	6
Info	Information or description	11	4
O	Other	15	4
	Total	403	100%

Table 1 – Breakdown of topics within students' blog

Table 1 show that 10% of topics were related to class activities and 16% related to reflecting on English language. This does appear to show that blogs could be a comfortable medium for students to reflect on their learning. A breakdown of individual students' contributions (Chart 2) shows the frequency and extends of reflection among students. Some students were more likely to reflect on their learning using their blogs than others. For example, 4 of the students used their blog to reflect on their learning a total of 10 times. One of the Students did not use the blog as a tool for reflection at all.
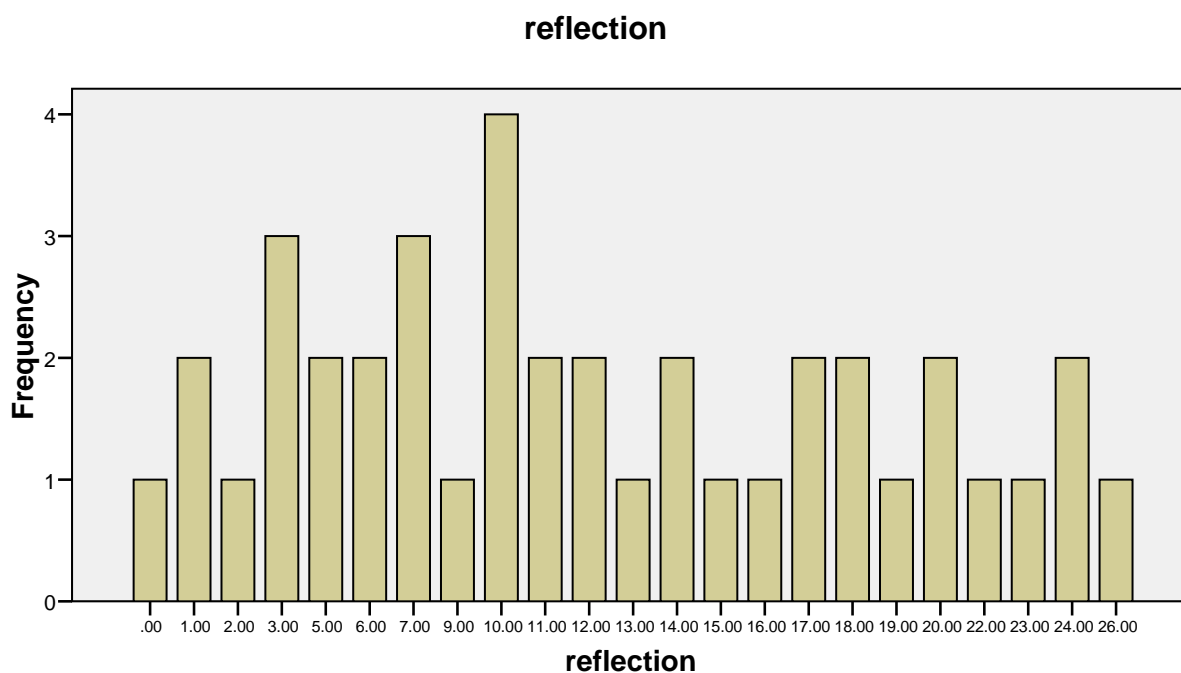
reflection

Chart 1 – Individual student entries reflecting on English

The students reflected on their learning at different times. Firstly, a number of students reflected on their learning when given the results of a test like the following examples show: (All the extracts were copied unaltered from students' blogs but the names have been changed).

> In the class, I took the test of TOEIC. It was a reading section which was difficult. I couldn't do well and I'm so disappointed in myself. I have to study a lot. (Hoda)

> I did a test of TOEIC which I got a little bad score was five point down by comparison with first test. I was shocked..... But I decided to do my best again and I want to get good score (Saman)

Students also wrote about ways they might improve their English skills like these examples show:

> I talk with Mohsen. we use just English from yesterday!! We are good boys?! In fact it is sometimes difficult for us but it is interesting too. (Farhad)

> I should study harder. I'd like to enhance my English much more (Sara).

Students also wrote about times when they felt that their language skills were inadequate like in this example (written after giving an account of when the student couldn't explain something to her host family)

I was really disappointed by the lack of my English ability. (Ali)

A further 10% of topic postings related to class activities like the following examples:

> In class, I did some role-plays. For example, I acted as a tour conductor, a ticketing agent, a hotel clerk, a ground staff and of course, a customer. These are really good experience for me. Actually, I booked a tour to Paris, so I was happy to have had these class previously (Reza).

> I was busy this week because there were a lot of tests. Presentation was tested this week. I presented the marriage. I investigated as a divorce, rings, and favorite typing and so on. It was necessary to speak the marriage for 15 minutes this time. I wrote what I spoke on paper and it practiced this week because the questionnaire had been finished by the end of last week. but presentation was difficult for me because I`m shy, so it`s hard for me to have confidence....but I didn`t want to fail like last presentation. So I want to improve! I did my best!? (Maryam)

The students who frequently chose their blogs to reflect on their learning over the sixty -week period were not necessarily the most autonomous students, or the students with the best abilities in English or the most prolific bloggers. For some reason, these students felt that their blogs were a way to reflect on their learning experience. The other students may have also been reflecting on their language learning just as much in other ways of course. The only tentative suggestion that can be drawn from the observations is that a blog *can* be one possible medium for reflecting on language learning. The students were aware that their blogs are public documents and wanted to communicate particular observations with their friends, teachers and families. Comments they received in return possibly helped them to reflect more deeply on their learning.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results of this small-scale study show that the students used their blogs as a medium to reflect on specific aspects of their learning. The students involved in this study wrote about their learning without being prompted to do so. This is a good example of what Little (1991) refers to as decision-making, detachment and critical reflection and certainly a clear indicator that blogs can provide opportunities for students to become autonomous learners. One recommendation would be that in similar blog projects, participants should be encouraged to share their feelings about learning with teachers and classmates, and that readers should be encouraged to write comments on the blogs, prompting further reflection.

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