

Blogs: Learning Through Using and Reusing Authentic Materials

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Abstract. Language learning and acquisition requires exposure to a language whether in a formal or informal learning environment as well as opportunities to produce the target language in a meaningful context. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the development of tools and web-based applications that allow written, audio, visual, and audio-visual material to be produced and shared – Web 2.0 – have been embraced by language teachers and learners. Authentic materials, those derived from the culture of the target language rather than specially produced for language learners, can not only be easily adapted to language learning using these new tools, they are potentially more relevant to learners because they increase opportunities for the creation of meaningful contexts for language learning. The objective of this paper is to assess the authenticity of English language learning materials shared by bloggers on blogs aimed specifically at English language learners or teachers. To reach this objective, the blog ranking site Technorati was used to select the most popular blogs for English language learners and teachers and each blog was analysed according to the authenticity of the cultural material used for language learning. The analysis reveals that more than 80% of the material posted on English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) blogs is authentic material reused for language learning. The results show Web 2.0 technologies to be conducive towards providing contemporary authentic material for language learning – the technology itself encourages the use of authentic materials.

Keywords: blogs, web 2.0, EFL, ESL, authentic materials.

1. Introduction

Learning a language requires meaningful learning experiences facilitated by opportunities to interact with and produce language – written, audio, visual, and audio-visual – that involve communication and whether these opportunities occur in a formal learning environment or not. Exposure to a language forms an integral part of the acquisition process (Krashen, 1985).

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Therefore, the development of tools and web-based applications that enable written, audio, visual, and audio-visual material to be produced and shared have been embraced by language teachers and learners. Whilst these developments have increased the variety and quantity of material available for language learning, quality is also an aspect that needs to be considered. Authentic materials – those derived from the culture of the target language rather than specially produced for language learners – increase the relevance of the learning experience by reusing texts taken directly from the target culture. Web 2.0 technologies increase opportunities for bringing authentic materials into formal language learning environments by allowing material to be collected, reused and shared amongst language teachers and learners (Downs, 2009).

The objective of this paper is to assess the authenticity of English language learning materials shared by bloggers on blogs aimed specifically at English language learners or teachers in order to draw some conclusions concerning the extent to which their potential to increase the use of more authentic learning materials has been developed.

2. Method

In order to evaluate the cultural content of language learning blogs, the criteria for choosing to include a particular blog needs to be established. The popularity of a blog measures the influence its contents have over a particular audience. There are essentially two measures of this: popularity through citations, as well as popularity through affiliation, i.e., blogroll (Technorati, 2010).

While it takes time for a blog to become popular through blogrolls, permalinks can boost popularity more quickly, and are perhaps more indicative of popularity and authority than blogrolls, since they denote that people are actually reading the blog's content and deem it valuable or noteworthy. Technorati (technology + literati) is a blog search engine that ranks blogs based on the number of incoming links, blogroll members, frequency of postings and comments, among other indicators, and uses these to measure a site's standing and influence in the blogosphere, a rating known as Technorati Authority. A site's authority may rapidly rise and fall depending on what the blogosphere is discussing at the moment, and how often a site produces content being referenced by other sites (Technorati, 2010). The sites were selected by cross-referencing the top sites based on Technorati Authority returned by tag searches for English language teaching. All sites rated with a Technorati Authority greater than 1 were evaluated. Of the more than 200 blogs with posts tagged as EFL/ESL only 17 had a Technorati authority rating greater than 1. These 17 blogs form the basis of this study.

The blogs were evaluated according to the authenticity materials (Nation, 2007) provided for language learners or as resources for language learning. One of the most promising aspects of Web 2.0 is the way it can connect learners to each other and to

authentic English language culture as opposed to material developed specifically for EFL learners. The criteria used to evaluate the content of the most popular EFL blogs aim to reflect on authenticity: the use of real, authentic material such as an article from a real newspaper rather than an article written for EFL learners to look as though it came from a newspaper.

3. Discussion

3.1. Content

Many cultural genres are represented in the blogs: movies, television and music, current affairs and news, as well as traditional English lessons broadcast by video or podcast. One blog is dedicated to the teaching of grammar through movie clips; several others adapt current news and activities for teaching English. Many use songs for teaching activities. Several cover information and communication technology (ICT), both hardware and software, for the teaching of second languages including news and advice for using ICTs and Web 2.0 for teaching English. Dialogues are also used in a wide range of contexts, especially in the podcasts and videos. Some are dialogues adapted to the class, but many are authentic dialogues recorded in real life situations.

The enormous variety of content available on the most popular EFL blogs provides a diverse, contemporary view of not English speaking cultures but many other cultures around the world. Some blogs use material in English to teach learners about other cultures, such as the Istanbul based blogger* who developed a lesson on the environment and the Amazon to teach English to primary school children, or language learning blogs based on Native American cultures.

3.2. Cultural diversity

The image of the English-speaking culture is modern and diverse, and all the blogs use contemporary culture to teach English. However, in terms of cultures, the cultures represented tend to be caucasian and western – occasionally African-American culture appears, but only as shown in hip-hop music or television and film rather than authentic materials relating to everyday life – with one important exception. One of the most popular blogs in second language teaching is entirely devoted to the history of American Indians and includes material and activities related to all major tribes of Native Americans in the United States.

However, the nature of the medium encourages diversity. Blogs allow multimedia use, reader participation and are free and easy to set up and therefore can reflect the diversity of the community they serve more easily than other types of old media such as textbooks, magazines and journals.

* Burcu Akyol: <http://burcuakyol.com> and <http://tedistanbul5thgraders2009.edublogs.org>

3.3. Authenticity: the amount of original material used

A high percentage, over 80%, of the teaching materials and lessons on blogs use authentic materials. This is not surprising. The nature of the environment and how Technorati measures blog popularity means that the blogs that have more frequent entries and more inbound links are rated more highly. This means that blogs that use relevant, contemporary materials are rated more highly by blog search engines and therefore receive more traffic which in turn further increases their rating. Authenticity is structurally encouraged in the medium and the search engines that serve it. Blogs provide direct access to authentic contemporary cultural artefacts taken from the language being learnt. This is theoretically predictable given the nature of the medium and this brief investigation shows it to be reflected in reality.

4. Conclusions

A blog is a chronological log, so it is an effective way for English teachers to share ideas, materials and experiences between themselves and their students, which are current and relevant. It allows the use of various types of media such as image, video, audio, text, as well as user interactivity in all of these different media. This means a blog can provide material, discussion and advice concerning all four skills necessary for second language acquisition: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This, together with the absence of intermediaries such as editors and publishers means that English learners can experience direct contact with contemporary English-speaking cultures in a way appropriate to their language ability while still enjoying access to authentic materials. This increases the opportunities for English teachers to enhance learning and motivate students.

The blogs analysed are also all excellent examples of a crucial aspect of teaching: sharing good practice. This is an essential aspect of continuing professional development. Previously, the ideas and experiences of teachers could be shared only amongst colleagues; blogs enable ideas and experience to be shared with any teacher or student with access to the internet anywhere in the world. The blogs analysed here harness the immense creativity of ordinary EFL teachers and make it available cheaply and easily for the entire profession.

Finally, this study has shown that blogs represent culture for English teachers and learners in a way that is as rich in its diversity of material as it is in the ways it is presented. It allows easy access to cultures that for many English teachers and learners are obscure or underrepresented in other types of media. The blogs use contemporary culture as the bloggers themselves encounter it, and given the participatory nature of blogs, this puts teachers and learners in control, rather than publishers and editors.

The results show an inherent bias within Web 2.0 technologies towards providing contemporary authentic material for language learning – the technology itself

encourages its use – and help to explain the ubiquitous use of these technologies in language learning communities.

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