

BLOGS AS A WAY TO ENHANCE EFL READING CLASSES IN A LEBANESE TERTIARY INSTITUTION

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of blogs in an intensive English program at a university in Lebanon. The paper reports on how blogs can contribute to language acquisition and the development of related literacy skills. Blogs were incorporated into the required curriculum as supplemental material over two semesters. The aim of the strategy was to see if the use of blogs would yield any observable benefits for students particularly in the areas of critical thinking and motivation to read and use the target language. Data were collected through a research diary and focus group interviews with the students. The findings reveal that the use of blogs can nurture students' critical thinking and enhance their motivation to read and use the target language.

Keywords: blogs, motivation, critical thinking, L2 methodology

1. Introduction

The authors teach English as a second or even third language in Lebanon where the mother tongue is Arabic. The environment at this university can be labeled as an English as a Foreign Language, or EFL environment. An EFL environment is understood to be an environment where the target language is not used outside of the language classroom as a rule. At this university the students, especially in the beginning or remedial levels of English, do default to their mother tongue, Arabic, outside of the language classroom. Such a context requires that the teachers of English not only be well-versed in second language acquisition but also in innovative pedagogical strategies meant to motivate students to use the target language and to increase the use of the target language (Bahous, Bacha, & Nabhani, 2011).

Using a grounded theory approach, this research study focused on the use of blogs as a teaching/learning strategy for second and third language learners of English. The researchers wanted to investigate whether or not the use of blogs would reveal students' critical thinking ability in the target language as well as discover if the strategy had any impact on their motivation to use English

2. Background

Effective use of digital technologies, particularly the Internet, has become an innovative pedagogical strategy in education today in any context. Some research studies are revealing that technology infused classes are in fact more effective than traditional learning environments (Grgurović, Chapelle & Shelley, 2013; Starkey, 2011). The Internet is not only an obvious vehicle for innovative pedagogical strategies but is also a necessary medium for the current generation. Warschauer (1998) argues that “[t]o know English well in the current era includes knowing how to read, write, and communicate in electronic environments.” (p. 758). In an age where the Internet has become ubiquitous, teachers should be aware of the importance of online communication to help students get more practice in the target language.

One tool for electronic communication is the weblog. A weblog, often called ‘blog’, can take the form of an online journal that a person can easily update (Campbell, 2003). Although blogs were not intended to be used for pedagogical purposes, they do provide many opportunities for language teachers and students alike including familiarizing students with online strategies and techniques (Ward, 2004) and in creating a non-threatening environment for students of English to experiment with their newfound digital skills. Many teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the potential benefits of blogs in education as tools for collaboration among students. However, the strategy of using blogs is still largely unexplored and most of the studies that have been conducted are descriptive dealing only with the characteristics of those tools (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Baniabdelrahman, Bataineh & Bataineh, 2007). Research into the use of blogs for enhancing language skill is still limited (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Kuteeva, 2011).

However, there is research that claims that blogs are effective learning tools for many reasons. They enhance students’ reading comprehension, writing skills, and promote learning autonomy (Ward, 2004; Garcia-Sanchez & Rojas-Lizana, 2012; Ducate, Lomicka, & Lord, 2012). In addition, blogs “enhance students’ analytical and critical thinking skills” and “provide a genuine learning context for EFL learners who have limited opportunities to be exposed to the target language in an authentic environment” (Noytim, 2010, p. 1128). Another reason why a blog is an effective learning tool is that it provides students with “the ability to communicate without the inhibitions and preconceptions that accompany most face-to-face interactions” (Ward, 2004, p.4). It is assumed that on blogs students will show less anxiety while participating in discussions and feel less self-conscious about expressing themselves in the target language. Inhibited and intimidated students in class sometimes become the most vociferous on the blog. A study conducted in an EFL environment in Chili also reports that a

blog is “a powerful tool that triggered interaction and communication among students” (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011, p.442).

2.1. Features of blogs that contribute to their effectiveness in English writing classrooms

Blogs can be used for educational purposes and specifically in a second language class in a variety of ways. The students in this study are learning English as a second or even a third language. Noytim (2010) and Campbell (2003) describe three types of categories for educational blogs including the tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog. Zawilinski (2009) offers other categories such as the classroom news blog, the mirror blog, the showcase blog, and the literature response blog. Although the two classifications overlap in some ways, the categorization mainly depends on the purpose that the instructor has in mind when setting up a blog or when instructing students to each set up an individual blog and maintain it.

Blogs can make communication easier and less intimidating. A study conducted by Lee (2010) revealed that regular blog entries had a positive influence on learners’ writing fluency. Some research reports that students feel more comfortable experimenting with writing on blogs in their new language because it is a stress-free, pressure-free environment (Nepomuceno, 2011). Furthermore, the existence of a real, interactive audience in the form of classmates and teacher gives the communication authenticity (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Noytim, 2010; Oravec, 2003). This kind of back and forth dialogue “stimulates debate, furthers critical analysis, and encourages articulation of ideas and opinions” (Godwin-Jones, 2006, p.11).

The interactive discourse that results leads students to develop strong powers of persuasion and argumentation through the development of their opinions on topics. Although some students might fall into the trap of believing or sharing inaccurate details and wrong claims that might be made by other students, blogs introduce students to different points of view, which may indirectly develop their critical thinking skills. Blogs can sometimes backfire if they become a catalyst for informal language or chat speak or become a place for criticism by other students. But with proper guidelines and instructor monitoring how students post their comments (Ward, 2004), blogs become an indispensable means for interaction among students in a language in which they are not comfortable expressing ideas in or communicating strongly held views on topics.

2.2. Critical thinking in the language classroom

One of the roles of education is to foster critical thinking skills in the learner. Dewey (1910) argues that although it is not the role of education to evaluate and examine for the learner

every argument that he encounters, it is the role of education “to ingrain into the individual's working habits methods of inquiry and reasoning appropriate to the various problems that present themselves” (p.28). This is certainly true at the tertiary level but definitely difficult when dealing with students who have weak proficiency in the language of instruction. And, yet, critical thinking ability is even more necessary for students in all types of contexts given the easy, quick access to information that technology provides (Starkey, 2011). The art of reflection that nourishes critical thinking is a key strategy to challenge habits of mind and entrenched ways of thinking. The use of blogs is an effective vehicle for this type of reflection (Lee, 2010).

Teachers of English as a foreign language have a particularly difficult task fostering critical thinking in a language that the students have either limited ability in or have high affective impediments towards. Absorbed in covering content material, many teachers overlook the importance of teaching critical thinking skills in their classes, or simply do not have time to deviate from the syllabus. In a research study conducted in Lebanon, El Hassan and Madhum (2007) assert that students should have understanding, metacognitive thinking, and problem-solving ability and, therefore, pedagogical strategies need to be cultivated and implemented to make that happen.

Although it is ignored in a lot of situations, there is strong interrelatedness between critical thinking and language development. Language learning is not merely the process of memorizing and repeating words and phrases. To become proficient in the language, students need a context in which to use their newfound language skill. Blogs can provide that context especially in an EFL environment where opportunities to use the target language are minimal. Blogs serve as tools to motivate students to interact with each other and hence become more proficient in the target language (Garcia-Sanchez & Rojas-Lizana, 2012; Nepomuceno, 2011). Blogs also have the inherent attribute of involving students in the learning process thereby making students become active learners (Ducate, Lomicka, & Lord, 2012). Effective language learning happens when there is meaningful communication that has a purpose. The higher-order thinking skills blogs foster help students reach a higher proficiency in the language. Blogs can provide the platform for the reflective thinking needed to access higher order processes (Wood, 2012).

3. The study

3.1. Research context

The Intensive English Program (IEP) at the target university in Lebanon organizes the curriculum around each of the four macro-language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Classes meet four hours a day, five days a week. Although critical thinking is cited on the course syllabus as a learning objective in the reading skill, the major focus is actually on reading comprehension and students' critical thinking ability on a topic is never evaluated. We thought blogs could be a way to address the critical thinking objective of the course.

This study adopted a grounded theory approach to the research focus rather than attempted to answer specific questions. Any theory on the contribution blogs as a pedagogical tool can make on students' critical thinking will be inductive. A grounded theory approach can help facilitate the description of what is happening to an understanding of the process by which 'it' is happening (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory does not discover knowledge but generates discourse that leads to theory building from the research data advancing better understanding of the social world (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A blog was set up for two different classes in the exit course of the IEP over two semesters, one in the spring 2012 semester and one in the fall 2013 semester for a 10 week period each semester. Glaser and Strauss (1967) posit that credibility of grounded theory research is achieved through sampling comparison groups in order to extend the generalizability of any resulting theory from the grounded theory approach. Therefore, two different classes participated in the research.

The class in the spring 2012 semester consisted of 14 students and the class in the fall 2013 consisted of 15 students for a total population of 29 students. Of the 29 students registered in the course, 22 were active on the blog. Two had no interest in technology and had no internet access at home. A third student had a problem with his internet connection during the first three weeks while the remaining 4 participated only sporadically claiming time was an issue. Participation in this research, which required extra time, was voluntary; 22 students in total participated. Students in the course level being researched either completed the previous pre-requisite course or had TOEFL scores that ranged from 481 to 526 placing them in this course. The ages of the students who participated in this study ranged between eighteen and twenty four. Students were informed that a study was taking place but were not enlightened as to the purpose of the study.

3.2. Design and procedure

The instructor/researcher devoted one lab hour at the start of the semester to give instructions to students on how to use the blog. Students were encouraged to log in daily, answer the question posted, and comment on each other's postings. Every week, for 10 weeks, students were required to read a short story that was posted on the blog of about 200 to 1,466 words and respond to a question that followed. Over the course of 10 weeks, 12 stories were posted in all. Table 1 provides a list of the stories used.

Table 1: Stories posted on the blog throughout the semester.

"The Fishing Boat" retrieved from http://www.emotionallegacy.com/LegacyStories/MexicanFishingStory.pdf
"The Lady or the Tiger" retrieved from http://www.manythings.org/voa/stories/The_Lady_or_the_Tiger_-_By_Frank_R_Stockton.html
"Facebook" retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/08/facebook-self-esteem_n_832924.html
"A Clever Dog" retrieved from http://www.inspirationalstories.com/11/1123.html
"The carrot, the egg, and the coffee bean" retrieved from http://www.rogerdarlington.co.uk/stories.html#Story28
"The Glass of Milk" retrieved from http://inspireme.net/stories/inspirational/True-inspirational-stories.htm
"Dreams" retrieved from http://www.scribd.com/doc/17281534/A-Collection-of-Inspirational-Short-Stories
"The Blind Man and the Advertising Story" retrieved from http://du111w.dub111.mail.live.com/default.aspx
"The Midas Touch" retrieved from http://du111w.dub111.mail.live.com/default.aspx
"The Fairy Story" retrieved from http://du111w.dub111.mail.live.com/default.aspx
"My Mom Only Had One Eye" retrieved from http://academictips.org/blogs/my-mom-only-had-one-eye/
"Positive Thinking" retrieved from http://academictips.org/blogs/positive-thinking/

In the middle of the week, at least one more question related to the same story was posted on the blog for students to respond to. Depending on students' answers, various follow-up questions were generated. Students were encouraged to read the story more than once, think about it, and respond to the questions in short paragraphs. They were also asked to comment on their classmates' postings by agreeing or disagreeing with them and then supporting their own opinions. Students were told at the beginning of the activity not to worry about grammar mistakes but to try to be as communicative as they could be. Table 2 below provides samples of questions and comments from the blog.

Table 2: Samples of questions and comments posted by the instructor and/or guest

<i>General questions posted to the group</i>	<i>Some samples of students' answers that suggest that they are thinking critically</i>	<i>Positive feedback was posted to individual students and follow up questions to encourage exploration</i>
What is the moral of the story?	I guess the moral here is to try to find a way to develop ourselves, to improve ourselves even though we're happy and satisfied in our life style. It is always for our own good!	"Good interpretation Manal!"
How would you describe the mother and son? What kind of personalities do they have?	Nowadays, every kid has some sort of embarrassment when it comes to parents. Either they are embarrassed in front of their friends or in front of some important people. So I don't really blame the son for such a behavior. But it is also a mean and selfish attitude; he didn't realize his mother's sacrifice only when she died. It was too late to go and apologize. He regrets every single harsh impression he gave her. His mother was real, behaved like a true mother and a great woman that sacrifices her whole life just to offer her child an amazing life full of happiness and success without any difficulties. She gave him her eye to avoid all the attitudes that she faced.	What do you think the son did and how did he feel after realizing the truth?
Do you think that all people handle the same situation the same way? What distinguishes some people from others? How do people react differently to problems?	Well, I think when people have problems they either face them or escape, for there are many different personalities. As human beings, we always face difficult situations because life is not that easy. In my opinion, the braver person is the one who reacts like the egg, soft in normal conditions and hard and strong when facing problems.	Good Manal and Hani. How would you react when facing problems? Would you describe yourself as an egg, carrot, or coffee bean?
What did this old woman get by achieving her goal?	What the woman proved in her story is that age isn't an obstacle for achieving our dreams. She dreamed of having a college degree. We should all learn that age is simply the number of years counted from our first birthday. Age has nothing to do with our goals, with our plans, and we can plan and dream till the last second of our lives and this is what Rose did until she died without	Good answer Sara. People should always think about their future. Do you know any person around you who is like this old woman? What obstacles did he/she overcome in order to achieve his/her goals?

	even realizing or feeling that it will be her last day. This means that we should live and develop as much as we can till the last breath.	
How would you describe the man?	It's worldwide known that women grow up faster than men. Women become mature before men. The husband was selfish because he thought of his own good. He wanted his wife to be younger so he could enjoy his trip. He forgot about all their love and what they have shared all these years.	Good interpretation! Do you have to be young to enjoy your life or can you enjoy it as long as you are with someone you care for?
How important is choice of words or language when we want to truly connect with and move other people's feelings?	We use language to express our feelings and desires. Language connects people with each other. Therefore, we should know which words to choose in order to affect people's feelings and make a change.	Great interpretations! Do you think of what you say before saying it? Why?

One of the researchers participated on the blog as well for both academic and research purposes. From an academic point of view the intention of having a guest was to expose the students to different perspectives to challenge them to think about an issue from multiple points of view. Concerning the research purpose, it was determined that having another perspective on the blog, specifically when it came to the analysis stage, would minimize subjectivity and, therefore, more credible conclusions could be asserted. The class instructor and the guest logged onto the blog daily in order to read the comments made by the students, respond positively and encouragingly to their comments, and post more questions for students to think about and respond to (see Table 2). Every time a student made a comment, the class instructor or the guest would ask the student to explain and support their opinion. The following screen shot illustrates this process.

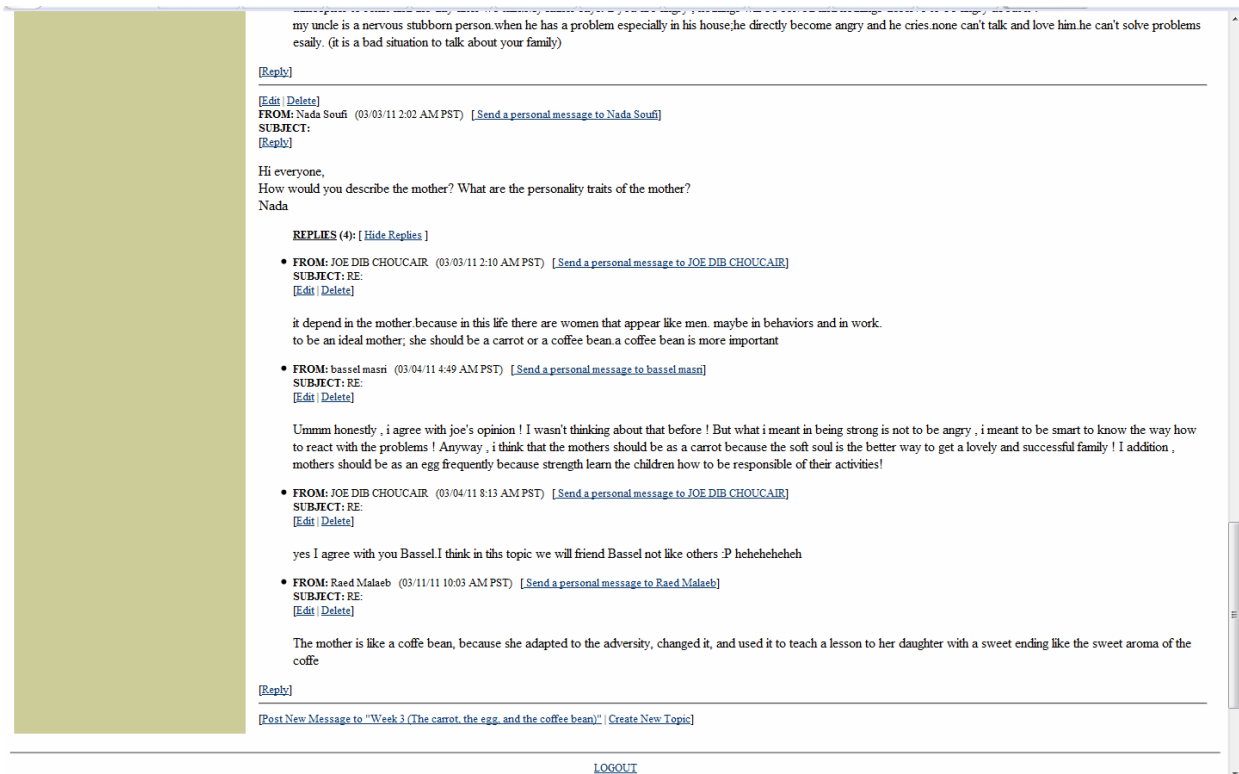


Figure 1. Screen shot of interactive process.

The objective of this strategy was to encourage students to think about ideas and opinions and reveal their thinking through written English; therefore, students were not corrected on language mechanics. The researchers assumed that without the fear of making mistakes and of being corrected in their grammar, students would be freer to contemplate and express their thinking in English. The students were asked to make judgments, make inferences, draw conclusions, find solutions to problems, imagine alternatives, and apply situations to their own lives.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Two methods of data collection were employed to excavate the benefits of the strategy. First, the instructor kept a research diary in which she reflected on students' interaction and involvement each week. Student posts that showed engagement with the texts or were particularly insightful were recorded in the diary. Other data such as frequency of posts were also recorded. Second, two focus group interviews were conducted each semester using an open ended interview protocol. Questions were asked to ascertain students' opinions regarding their motivation towards the use of the blog and motivation to use English. In

addition, the researchers wanted to glean whether or not students thought they were developing their critical thinking skill in English.

All the students in the class were invited to participate in the focus groups, even those who did not participate consistently in the blog activity. The intention of including all was to get their direct feedback on why they did not participate in the activity. Only 26 students in total actually participated in the focus group interview making two groups of 9 and 2 respectively for the first research population and 7 and 8 respectively for the second research population. The teacher asked one question at a time and asked students to give their opinion. Both researchers present recorded answers and impressions for later analysis. Each focus group interview lasted 30 minutes. The focus group interviews were recorded so the raw data could later be accessed during the analysis.

A constant comparative method of data analysis was employed as discussed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The two researchers were joined by the third at this stage and assigned meaning to the observations recorded in the diary as well as to the blog content by coding like kinds together. As the coding process took place, analysis was being conducted. Without a pre/post-test strategy enhancement of students' critical thinking cannot be specifically measured. However, through close reading of the data the researchers looked for evidence of students accessing higher order processes and consequently were able to draw conclusions about students' critical thinking during the research process. Given that the research was an exploration of a teaching methodology the analysis focused on the intended result; i.e. were students reading and engaging with the text and were they exhibiting critical thinking as a result of their involvement with the text and the questions posed. As discussed in the literature review, student interaction can result in enhanced critical thinking skills; therefore, the researchers looked at the kinds of interaction and specifically if the interaction was substantive.

3.4. Results and findings

First, the findings from each data gathering instrument will be displayed and explained starting with the themes from the diary and then the themes from the interviews. The students' real names will neither be used in the discussion nor anywhere in this report. Table 3 displays the themes that emerged from the constant comparison analysis of the two diaries recorded over the two semesters.

Table 3. Emergent themes from the two diaries

Students developed critical thinking ability
Students were interested in shorter stories.
Students were interested and highly motivated at the beginning, but motivation and participation decreased around week 10.
Students were interested and discussed the stories in class.

Perhaps the most important theme that emerged is that the blog activities seemed to nurture and develop students' critical thinking skills in English. The following three examples of the data that informed this theme illustrate students' thinking in a critical way. The researchers looked for comments such as these that would demonstrate some problem solving skills and/or perceptive insight through the medium of English.

In response to "The Fishing Boat", Clara commented, "I guess the moral here is to try to find a way to develop ourselves to a better phase in life and to improve ourselves even though we're happy and satisfied in our life style. It is always for our own good! If I was the fisherman, I would take into consideration what the tourist applied because it is always good to listen to educated and well experienced people in their work life."

Sara commented on Mazen's post saying, "Mazen is right money is not everything but getting it becomes harder with growing in age so the fisherman should work and give the maximum he can to ensure his future life too regardless that he should enjoy his life with his family in the same time."

In response to "The Carrot, the Egg, and the Coffee Bean", Tom stated, "Of course not. Not all the people are the same. I believe that we all are a product of our decisions. However, we must believe in what we are doing and not give up."

The next theme displayed on the table states that students were interested in the shorter of the two stories that were posted and eventually ignored the longer of the two texts. This phenomenon happened during both semesters identifying the occurrence as a theme in this research. This resulted in only one story being posted in subsequent weeks. Further research should be conducted to be able to draw an accurate conclusion as to why this happened but an inference can be made in this situation. The inference is that students found it challenging to focus on a text in the target language, choosing to work with only one and the shorter one at

that. Consequently, while the blog activity did get them to read and work with and in English, it cannot be said at this point that the blog activity motivated them to read more.

The third theme extracted from the two semesters of the diary reveals that as the semester progressed to week 10 both populations showed less enthusiasm for the activity than had been displayed up to that point. Coincidentally, at approximately the same point in both semesters Lebanon experienced an increase in civil strife with schools closing and danger on the streets. Therefore, it is difficult to infer whether or not the natural fatigue of sustaining interest in an activity can be to blame or if the added stress and the preoccupation that accompanies such stress is the larger contributor to the fall-off in enthusiasm for this population or a possible combination of both.

The last theme to emerge from the two semester diaries reveals students' enthusiasm for the content of the stories in both populations. Both groups of students tried to insert discussions of what they had read on the blog into regular class sessions. Analysis of the diary entries revealed that the instructor/researcher found this of interest inferring that students felt a sense of pride at being able to comprehend what they had read in English. The diary also revealed the impression that students developed enhanced interest in the themes and storylines as a result of being required to think about the issues in the stories more thoroughly through the critical thinking questions and give and take of opinion with fellow bloggers. Table 4 displays the themes that emerged, through inductive analysis, from the focus group interviews.

Table 4: Focus group interview data (n=22).

Used critical thinking skills	22 students
Practiced reading	22 students
Felt motivated to read	22 students
Used formal English for educational purposes rather than chat speak	20 students
Thought the blog was user-friendly and efficient	20 students
Had enough time to read and analyze at home	22 students

Table 4 above shows the themes that emerged as a result of the focus group interviews with the students. Perhaps the most important theme that was revealed is that students believed that they did nurture and develop their critical thinking skills as a result of the blog activity and this theme corroborates the theme that emerged through the diary data.

The emergent themes also reveal that a majority of students found the blog useful to practice reading, which they claimed they rarely did outside the classroom. A majority of the students also found the activity motivating. Students were interested to read and comment on their friends' posts. They also impatiently waited to check the comments that their friends made on their posts. Therefore, most of the students (20 out of 29 students) logged in daily to read their friends' comments.

Some of the students found the blog beneficial for developing their formal written language ability and most recognized the value of the activity for developing their thinking skills. Five students asserted that they found the Internet useful for practicing their English language skills. They practiced using formal English instead of using chat speak. Most of the students (24 out of 29 students) found the stories as well as the questions posed by both the instructor and the guest challenging. The students had to analyze and think critically to answer the questions. A large majority of students also felt confident to post their ideas in English to the blog. Students claimed that since they didn't have to worry about being graded on their grammar it was easier for them to try to express themselves in English.

The majority of students (24 out of 29) also found the blog convenient and easy to use. In fact, none of the participants claimed any kind of phobia or concern about learning how to use the technology. A large majority of students asserted the efficiency of the blog claiming they had enough time to read, understand, and think about the stories at home without the pressure of an academic environment.

4. Discussion

Through this research students were introduced to blogging as a supplemental activity to the required curriculum. This research activity supports other research that claims that blogging has many benefits for language learning, including developing the writing skill (Wood, 2012; Ward, 2004; Warschauer, 1998). Without the pressure to write correctly, knowing that they would not be graded or their language evaluated gave students freedom to express themselves in the target language. The blog was an efficient way to motivate students to practice written communication in English outside the confines of the classroom thereby providing more exposure to the target language. Both populations each semester had a majority of students

consistently participating which would suggest that the pedagogical strategy can reach and therefore benefit the majority of a population.

This study reveals that students' ability to read and think about a topic in their target language is made visible through the blog. The study also affirms research that asserts that blogs are a tool that helps to motivate students and facilitate student interaction in the target language (Garcia-Sanchez & Rojas-Lizana, 2012). Zawilinski (2009) stresses that it is drawing students' attention to different perspectives provided by their classmates which makes them think critically. Their beliefs and opinions on topics are expressed and evaluated which requires higher order thinking processes. To convince other students of one's perspective, a student has to provide clear and logical support, which is an important aspect of critical thinking. According to this study, a blog is revealed as an unthreatening way for second language learners to develop this important skill in the target language.

Furthermore, this study elucidates the principle that students of a language require authentic contexts and use of the language in order to be able to nurture newfound skills. Blogs do provide students with an authentic context to practice the language (Noytim, 2010; Warschauer, 1998). In addition to the authenticity of the task, blogs provided the time these students needed to live with and think about the content. They had the time to read and reread stories at their own convenience and think about them. Language classrooms, especially intensive language programs, by their nature do not provide this time that students often require. Intensive programs require that a certain amount of curriculum is covered in the given amount of time; many language students find this restriction very difficult to deal with and consequently language acquisition is compromised.

Importantly, this study corroborates some of the findings from the research conducted by Bahous, Bacha and Nabhani (2011) in a similar context in Lebanon. Specifically, Lebanese students' motivation for English language learning is closely connected to the type of teaching strategies they are exposed to. Their interest needs interaction with one another and the technology activity reported here can provide that interaction in a non-threatening way. In a typical language classroom in Lebanon, little emphasis is given to interaction and communication in the classroom thus leaving learners with little chance for expressing themselves in the target language. The teacher's main concern tends to be coverage of the syllabus leaving no time for communicative approaches to language learning. The blog activity can provide the catalyst to shift from the teacher-controlled classroom approach to a student-centered classroom approach in the language classroom.

5. Conclusion

In spite of the infrastructure obstacles in this context the research positively asserts the benefit of technology interventions, blogs in particular, in a second language classroom. Specifically, this research suggests that students' studying English as a second language can strengthen their critical thinking ability in the target language through this digital medium (Starkey, 2011). Despite some obstacles such as incomplete accessibility and unreliable internet as experienced at this site as well as others (see Nepomuceno, 2011) a blog site can enhance language acquisition and accompanying literacy skills. "Therefore, blogging can be used as an additional writing activity which would motivate learners to view writing as a means of expressing meaning and not merely as a requirement in language classes" (Nepomuceno, 2011, p.104).

Data from student blog posts and focus group interviews suggest that this project motivated students to do more practice in reading and writing outside the classroom. Students had enough time to read the stories at their own pace and to reread some of them if needed. As evidenced by their activity, they felt less inhibited to express their opinions and to comment on each others' posts. Although some research reports that integrating modern technological activities into the language classroom is not a panacea to effective teaching and learning (Simpson, 2013), there are inherent benefits of blogs, particularly, and technology is an integral part of modern life and therefore should be used in a way that accentuates its benefits.

In addition to all the other benefits of blogging for English language learners in an EFL context, having a class blog helps to foster autonomous learning in students (Ward, 2004). The instructor acted as a facilitator giving students freedom to interact with each other and express their own ideas. The instructor's role was mainly to encourage students to read, reread and think more about the stories. Using technology does require a pedagogical shift but teachers should be encouraged to make this shift in order to utilize tools that can enrich learning environments particularly in EFL contexts (Baniabdelrahman et al., 2007). The students also had to manage their own time regarding reading the story, posting their ideas and responding to other students' comments.

Finally, this research highlights the need for further research particularly concerning the drop off in activity in week 10. Nepomuceno (2011) reports a downward trend at about week 7 in that study and offers as a possible reason choices in priorities as well as technology obstacles. Certainly, this research site experienced unreliable internet at times or in the case of the few students who did not participate, no access to the internet. Priorities are always an issue with university students who are juggling heavy work schedules. As discussed above,

this population dropped off in week 10 in both semesters which coincided with civil strife in the country both times suggesting that these students could have been motivated to continue the activity if that outside interference had not happened. Further research could possibly confirm this assumption or corroborate the situation in this study and Nepomuceno's and offer a reason for declining interest after the halfway mark in a semester. Further research should also aid in implementing blogging in the most efficient way possible to enhance language learning and develop strong communicative, critical thinking skills in the target language.

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