



A blog as a Tool for Reflection for English Language Learners

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Bio Data:

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Abstract

Educators 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 female Japanese college students. Twenty-two students kept voluntary blogs in their free time throughout a semester they spent studying English in the UK. 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 educators to use in order to encourage students to reflect on their learning.

Introduction

A blog (or web log) is a kind of online diary that has been reported to be a useful tool for language learners for a number of reasons. Blogs provide authentic writing practice (Brooks, Nichols and Priebe, 2004), an opportunity to recycle language learned in class (Pinkman, 2005), and an alternative way of communicating with teachers and peers. Blogs help students to develop audience awareness (Palfreyman, 2004a; Ward, 2004), to create a collaborative class environment (Barrios, 2003; Huffaker, 2004), and have also been reported to be a motivating learning activity

(Brooks, Nichols and Priebe, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004). Although little research yet 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 blogs can provide opportunities for students to develop such a capacity. Firstly, while keeping blogs, students begin to demonstrate “independent action” by taking responsibility for ownership of their writing as they are producing a publicly accessible document. This differs from work produced only 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 blogs and correct mistakes they had made. In addition, blogging requires authors to make meaningful decisions. Students own their blogs and have to make decisions about the content they display on them. Ward (2004) asked his students what they liked best about the weblog assignments, and one of the main responses was that the students had the freedom to choose their own topics and express their personal views.

Hand-written journals have long had a place in the language classroom, 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.

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 Japanese college students.

The study

Background

Throughout the fall semester of 2005, twenty-six female Japanese students of English spent one semester abroad as part of their two-year college program. The students had a pre-intermediate to intermediate level of English and were aged 18 and 19. The students had been accustomed to keeping non-graded, handwritten journals in English in the first semester. They were invited to continue this practice in the form of blogs during their second semester (twelve weeks), which was spent at a university language center in the UK. The students were told that the blogs should keep people at their college in Japan informed of activities and aspects of their lives in the UK. The blogs acted as an informal way for students to communicate with their teachers and to write about important events. Participation in the project was voluntary, blogs were written during the students' free time and no grades were assigned. Students were given no guidelines in terms of length and frequency of entries expected. Twenty-two out of the twenty-six students maintained their blogs during their stay in the UK. 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 not to measure or compare data, but to simply 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: *To what extent 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 they 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 pre-determined 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 twenty-two student blogs over the 12-week period and were logged (table 1 and chart 1).

Code	Topic	Number of topics	% of total postings
FE	Activity with friends	95	26%
HF	Activity with host family	57	15%
J/E	Comparing Japan with the UK	33	9%
ENG	Reflecting on English skills	69	19%
YK	Reflecting on study abroad experience	20	5%
CL	Class activity	35	9%
CT	Class trip	9	2%
SI	Self-introduction	9	2%
F	Future plan	32	9%
Inf	Information or description	9	2%
O	Other	8	2%
	Total	376	100%

Table 1 – Breakdown of topics within students’ blog

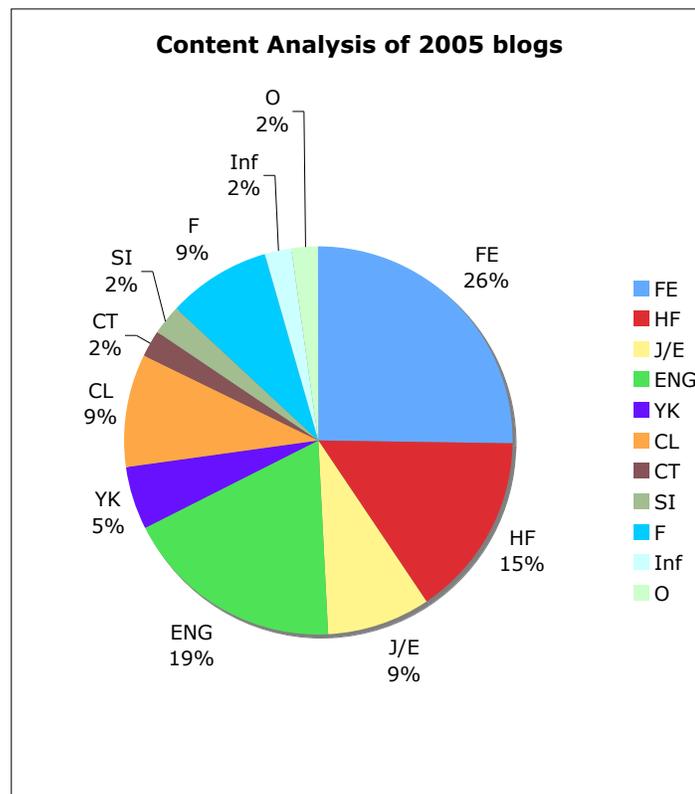


Chart 1 – Content analysis of the blogs

Chart 1 and Table 1 show that 9% of topics were related to class activities and 19% 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 that some students were more likely to reflect on their learning using their blogs than others. For example, student number 9 used her blog to reflect on her learning a total of 13 times. Student number 22 did not use her blog as a tool for reflection at all.

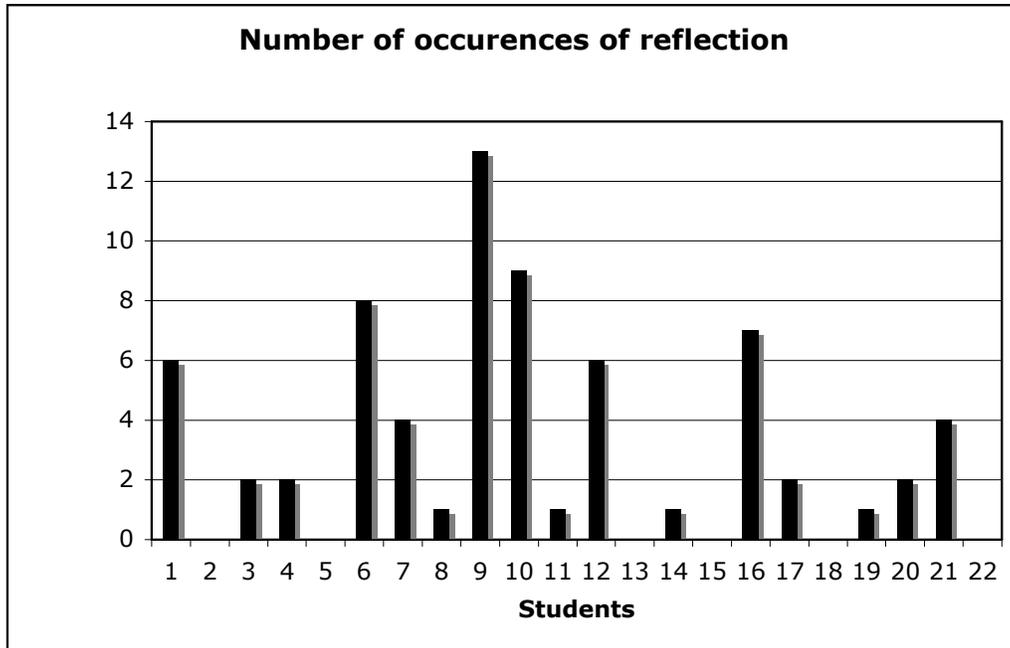


Chart 2 – Individual student entries reflecting on English

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 dissatisfied in myself. I have to study a lot. (Hanae)

I did a test of TOEIC which I got a little bad score was one point down by comparison with first test. I was shocked..... I hoped that I could had good score! But I decided to do my best again and I want to get good score (Hikaru)

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

I talk with Yukiko, we use just English from yesterday!! we are good girl?! In fact it is sometimes difficult for us but it is interesting too. (Erika)

I feel I should study harder. I'd like to improve my English much much more (Hanae).

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. (Akiko)

A further 9% 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 (Hanae).

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! (Hikaru)

The students who frequently chose their blogs to reflect on their learning over the twelve-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. This observation was noted too late to interview students and investigate possible reasons for this. 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. The question remains however: to what extent should an instructor promote the using of blogs as a tool for reflection?

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.

Limitations and directions for further research

This is a small-scale preliminary study involving just twenty-two student blogs with no follow-up interviews or questionnaires, and as such makes no generalizable claims. However, conducting a number of small-scale studies of this nature could eventually help educators to achieve a greater understanding of how blogs might be used as a tool for reflecting on learning.

In addition to using their blogs as tools for reflecting on their learning, it is likely that the learners reflected on their English as they wrote their blogs. However, it is impossible to evaluate this claim from the available data. Conducting interviews (in the students' native language) may have lead to a greater understanding of processes students applied when writing their blogs. These interviews should preferably take place as the students write their blogs or immediately afterwards. This study highlights the need for further research in this area.

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