

How Blogging Can Promote Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility that blogging in the target language could be a useful tool for language learning and promoting learner autonomy. It draws on data collected over a two year period with almost 100 students in a women's college in Japan. The questionnaires and interviews revealed that students were positive about blogging and felt that it helped them to learn English. The blogs themselves also showed examples of students using challenging and personalised language. In addition, a number of the blog posts showed evidence of students publicly reflecting on aspects of their learning without being required to do so. The paper does not make any generalisable claims, but does suggest that blogs have a role to play in the language classroom.

Introduction

This paper investigates whether blogging has the potential to promote autonomy in language learners. Blogging is essentially online journaling and is proving to be a motivating form of authentic language practice for many students. Students have the opportunity to write about something personal and meaningful to them for a real audience. Given these benefits, blogging is likely to be a useful language learning tool; however, little research has been done into how blogs help students to learn a language and how the activity might contribute to the development of learner autonomy, in particular reflection.

Blogs and Journals

Hand-written journals are quite common in the EFL classroom and are used in order to encourage frequent, spontaneous or reflective writing by students. There are a number of similarities between blogging and journal writing. Firstly, students engage in target language writing practice in both activities. Both are ways to communicate with a teacher, and both give students opportunities to reflect on their learning. Diaries and blogs have also been reported to develop students' metacognitive skills (Palfreyman, 2005a, 2005b). In addition, the two activities give students opportunities to recycle language. Finally, both encourage spontaneous writing rather than polished ideas.

There are a number of differences between blogging and journaling. Firstly, blogs are publicly accessible and can help students to develop a sense of audience awareness (Ward, 2004; Palfreyman, 2005b). They have also been reported to help to promote a collaborative class environment (Barrios, 2003; Huffaker, 2004). Another reported benefit is that comments posted by readers can spark an online debate (Godwin-Jones, 2006). In addition, writers receive feedback, sympathy and encouragement (Lowe & Williams, 2004), which may increase motivation (Palfreyman, 2005b). Finally, blogs allow students to post pictures and links which support their ideas and help them to express themselves more clearly.

Other studies have been conducted in language classrooms in Japan and have presented blogging as a useful tool for Japanese learners of English (see

Pinkman, 2005; Naganuma & Blackstone, 2006), but the researchers did not specifically focus on learner autonomy.

Learner Autonomy

Taking the view that learner autonomy incorporates a number of 'capacities' (Little, 1991), blogging has the potential to promote learner autonomy in four main ways. Firstly, it promotes decision making. Students direct and control their blogs and have to decide when to post, what to write about, how often to post and, indeed, whether to post at all. The second way is about responsibility over an aspect of learning. Students are the owners of a publicly accessible document and assume complete responsibility for it. The third way is transfer and personalisation of content, skills or language that has been more formally learned. Students are given an opportunity to personalise language learned in class and other places and use it meaningfully. Finally, blogs offer an opportunity for learners to reflect on the language they use in their blogs, the learning process, and the learning environment. This paper will mainly focus on this last point, critical reflection.

Critical Reflection

Little (1991) highlights critical reflection as one of the key capacities of learner autonomy. There are a number of ways in which blogs can provide opportunities for students to develop such a capacity. Yang, Chan, Lik-ko Ho & Tam (2005) write that exchanging ideas with peers electronically is not only motivating, but also provides opportunities for developing critical-thinking skills. Blogging can also be said to influence the way learners 'think about thinking' (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, p. 254). In order to investigate the concept of critical reflection using a technology tool, it is useful to draw on some concepts and terms from the field of cognitive psychology. Technology-based 'cognitive tools' (Lajoie, 2005) or 'mindtools' (Jonassen, 1996) are computer applications such as blogs which allow learners to express and/or present their own ideas. Presenting their ideas entails reflecting on what they actually know, reorganising knowledge leading to deeper learning; as Lajoie puts it: '...technology can amplify what we know...cognitive tools go beyond amplification and can help learners reorganise their knowledge in a manner that results in deeper understanding' (2005, p. 87). In a language learning context, tools such as blogs could provide a way for students to reflect on the language they are using as they use it and later when they re-read their blog posts. There is also potential for students to reflect on the learning process.

Summary of Research Project (2005-2007)

This is a brief summary of the research; more details can be found in Mynard (2007) and Mynard (2008). The research took place at a two-year women's college in Aichi, Japan. All of the students were English language majors in the second semester of their first year. There were three groups of participants. All of the students were Japanese native speakers aged 18 or 19 who had a low-intermediate level of English. Training was given to students and they used a free blog service provided by Tripod.com. There were three groups of participants:

- **Group 1** was made up of students spending one semester abroad in the UK in the autumn semester of 2005-6. The students were taught how to write a blog and encouraged to do so as a way to stay in touch with teachers and friends in Japan through English. This was an optional activity and no credit was assigned. Out of 26 students, 22 kept blogs and 15 of these students were regular blog writers.
- **Group 2** were the study abroad students of the following year. They were actively encouraged to keep blogs but again no credit was assigned. All 22 students kept

blogs as some class time was assigned for the blogging if they wished to use it. Some students were more active than others and also wrote in their free time.

- **Group 3** consisted of 46 students who remained in Japan and were required to keep blogs as part of their coursework. 10% of their grade was allocated for blogging, taking content, complexity of language and frequency of posts into account.

Research Questions

The research questions were deliberately broad to allow for unforeseen factors to emerge from the data in accordance with grounded theory techniques (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The questions were also designed to inform changes to the blog project in subsequent years. The two questions were:

Question 1: Is blogging a worthwhile language learning activity for the participants?

Question 2: To what extent did students use their blogs to reflect on their learning?

Data Collection

The study was interpretative in nature, and aimed to investigate how students felt about blogging and how the activity might be useful for learning. Surface-level language analysis was conducted (this did not include a thorough discourse analysis) in order to find examples of where students used more challenging language. The data collection methods were:

- Participant questionnaires after completing the blog project (appendix)
- Participant interviews after completing the questionnaires in order to probe for more details
- Researcher observations throughout the project
- Blog content analysis
- Basic analysis of language used

Findings

The findings are organised according to three main strands: blog content, students' perceptions and the use of blogs for reflection.

Content

With regards to content, students usually decided what to write about, which tended to be about their weekends, club activities and daily life. The students based in the UK also wrote about host families, cultural observations, class work, class trips, and their experiences using English. The students in Japan felt they had less to write about and were sometimes given suggestions from the teachers. There was evidence across the groups of students using new language they had learned in class in personally meaningful ways. There were very limited examples of students posting comments on other students' blogs, possibly because this facility was not covered in the training.

Perceptions

The participants were generally positive about the blog project with almost 100% of the students claiming to enjoy the activity. Most felt that the process helped them to learn English for various reasons: it provided authentic writing practice opportunities, it gave them a reason to use new language, and it challenged the students to use varied language. Some of the other benefits that students cited were that blogging helped them to express their frustrations or worries, to connect with friends, and to feel proud of their language abilities. It became evident that students wrote for themselves as much as they did for an audience. There were very few negative points mentioned. Some group 1 students noted that blogging in a second language is very time consuming as the learner needs to write drafts and look up

words. Consequently, in the following year, group 2 students were allocated some class time once a week for blogging if they wished. Some group 2 students suggested that students should be offered alternatives to blogging. This was implemented with the 2007-8 study abroad students who were invited to keep blogs, diaries or write e-mails. Around a third of the 2007-8 students chose each approach.

This interview extract with one group 2 student explains how she liked blogging because it challenged her to use new language:

I liked it. Because I tried, I can try to use new grammar, it is interesting. I want to study grammar to I challenge to write new grammar

Another group 2 student wrote on the questionnaire how she felt blogging helped her to develop her English:

I think that was nice to improve English. In diary, blog we have to search what we need. Words or how to write sentence. I think I could improve by blog.

A group 1 student wrote:

I think, keeping blog is hard. However, it was a good writing practice for me. And I could see friends's blog. I could know that they where go weekend, thier hostfamily and thier life in York etc. It was interesting for me.

Reflection

There was evidence of reflection in the blog posts themselves. Thirty three percent of the posts written by group 1 and 2 students (combined) were reflective (see table 1 for a breakdown). The students based in Japan barely ever reflected on their learning, unless they wrote blogs in their free time.

Table 1: Total reflective blog posts (groups 1 and 2 combined)

Comparing Japan with the UK	7%
Reflecting on English skills	13%
Reflecting on the study abroad experience	13%
Commenting on class activities	6%
Total reflection posts	33%

The following extracts are copied from the students' blogs and are good examples of how they publicly reflected on their English skills without being required to do so:

When we went to Betty's [a popular tea shop] at first, we couldn't read the menu. We read with dictionary. But now we can understand it and read without dictionary. We were happy! (a student from group 1)

my host mother said to me 'Your English is getting worth [worse] recently!!!'. So I felt very sad this morning ...I tried to speak English well very hard everyday. However, it's not good. This is true. I came here to study English but my English isn't good still now..... It's only 3 weeks but my host mother can't understand my English! It's big problem, isn't it? (a student from group 2)

Today, I got a hoped-for mail from TOEIC.... It was much better than I thought...Now I will learn and practice more useful words, because sometimes,

words for TOEIC score are not useful for my present life. I wanted to improve my TOEIC score as soon as possible, so I learned the words a lot. But you know, if I'm not interested in it and don't often use it; I forget it soon after the test. It's not a waste, but I think it's an inefficient way for me. (a student from group 3)

The following blog extract gives an example of a student commenting on a class activity:

In class, I did some role-plays... These are really good experience for me. Actually, I booked a tour to Paris, so I was happy to have had these class previously. (a student from group 1)

Conclusions and Questions

This exploratory research offers few conclusions and raises a number of questions at this early stage of research and clearly further work is needed in the area. This is how the evidence addresses the research questions:

Question 1: Is blogging a worthwhile language learning activity for the participants?

The study highlighted several reasons, such as students' positive perceptions and eager participation, and personalisation of language which suggests that blogging is a worthwhile language learning activity and provides learners with meaningful writing practice.

Question 2: To what extent did students use their blogs to reflect on their learning?

The study showed that students reflect on the learning process through their blogs, but it is difficult to say whether blogs assist in bringing these reflections to the surface. The following question arises: are the more reflective students drawn to blogging or does blogging draw out reflection in learners? Would students benefit from being shown examples of reflective blogs or being trained to reflect using their blogs? See Pinkman's study for her suggestions.

This study suggests that blogs might be useful for language learning, but this is only the beginning. Despite drawing on over two years of research, this is just a preliminary study, and as such makes no generalisable claims. However, studies such as this one will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of how blogs might be used as a learning tool in time.

The Author

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Appendix – Student Questionnaire

1. Did you write your blog regularly? Why / Why not?
2. What were some of the good things about keeping the blog?
3. What did you learn from the experience?
4. What were some of the negative or difficult things about keeping a blog?
5. Would you recommend that other students write blogs? Why / why not?
6. How do you think the blog project could be improved?

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