

Blogging as an Instructional Tool in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Theories on emerging technologies have stated that using blogs in the classroom can engage students in discussion, support peer learning, and improve students' literacy skills. Research has pointed to many ways that blogging is beneficial to student learning when used as an instructional tool. The researchers conducted a project that investigated the use of blogs in ESL instruction. Graduate education students who were taking coursework in order to earn a master's degree in TESL and/or teacher certification in ESL learned how to create and use blogs for educational purposes. While completing their ESL field experience requirement in U.S. K-12 school settings, these students noted how they observed blogs being used, and they interviewed ESL teachers about their experience in using blogs in the classroom. After their observations and interviews, these students completed a questionnaire in which they reported, summarized, and reflected on the use of blogs in an ESL curriculum and instructional implications. The article shares the results of this qualitative research study.

Introduction

Theories on emerging technologies have stated that using blogs in the classroom can engage students in discussion, support peer learning, and improve the literacy skills of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Research has pointed to many ways that blogging is beneficial to student learning when used as an instructional tool.

The researchers conducted a project that investigated the use of blogs in ESL instruction. Graduate education students who were taking coursework in order to earn a master's degree in TESL and/or teacher certification in ESL learned how to create and use blogs for educational purposes. While completing their ESL field experience requirement in K-12 school settings in the United States, these students noted how they observed blogs being used, and they interviewed ESL teachers about their experience in using blogs in the classroom. After their observations and interviews, these students

completed a questionnaire in which they reported, summarized, and reflected on the use of blogs in an ESL curriculum and instructional implications.

This paper will provide a review of the literature related to blogging as an instructional tool, specifically with English language learners. Then, the results of this research project will be shared, and the data will be discussed in the context of current practices in using blogging in ESL instruction. The presentation, analysis, and discussion of the data collected from current and future ESL educators may serve as a guide for teachers considering whether to implement blogs as an instructional tool in the ESL classroom.

Review of the Literature

Research has identified many benefits of blogging as an instructional practice. For instance, Armstrong and Retterer (2008), Bloch (2007), Noytim (2010), and Sun (2009) asserted that using blogs in language instruction can help language learners develop English writing skills. Students learn to write as they write to learn, and blogging enables students to communicate with an authentic audience. Grami (2012), Mynard (2007), and Noytim (2010) also pointed to blogs as tools that can augment students' higher-order thinking skills. McLeod (2001) stated that blogs "help students explore and assimilate new ideas, create links between the familiar and unfamiliar, mull over possibilities, and explain things to the self before explaining them to others" (p. 152).

Blogging also expands the community of learners beyond the confines of the classroom and allows for connections to be made and communication gaps to be bridged. Blogs promote student reflection and metacognition, providing students the opportunity to "reflect on their perceptions of the learning materials and on their own learning process" (Seitzinger, 2006, p. 6). Additionally, the use of blogs in the classroom is beneficial to English language learners because blogs are used in coursework, in business, and for pleasure. As Smith (2009) stated, "To fully acculturate into society, ELLs need to be conversant with the language and culture of their peers" (p. 75).

Furthermore, Bakar, Latif, and Ya'acob (2010) and Custin and Barkacs (2010) referred to blogs as constructivist learning tools. Blogging aligns with the constructivist approach, as it is collaborative, meaningful, authentic, active, and manipulative by nature. As Bakar, Latif, and Ya-acob (2010) stated, "The use of blog in the classroom can be said to embrace the philosophy of social constructivism whereby the learners acquire new knowledge of the subject matter through discussions, and further expand this newly-acquired knowledge by applying it in different situations" (p. 122). Similarly, Lohnes (2006) described blogging as a dynamic type of interaction that supports communication in a learning community. When blogs are used by students and teachers in order to facilitate thought-provoking discussion, application of concepts, and connections between concepts and between learners, they have the potential to personalize the learning experience and highlight reflection as a key practice in a student-centered learning environment. Thus, blogs "provide a promising forum for active, interactive, and collaborative online communication" (Sun, 2012, p. 494).

Smith (2009) reported on a project in which high school English language learners were required to complete and submit reading logs online. The researcher hypothesized that using blogging in this way would allow students to improve their skills in language

reception, in terms of their reading, viewing, and listening skills. The researcher also hypothesized that blogging would lead to progress in students' abilities to process and construct English. Smith reported that students' skills in receiving, processing, and constructing English increased after the use of blogging in language instruction.

Grami (2012) conducted a study in which seven Saudi ESL students participated in a classroom blog project over a period of four weeks. Each student was required to post a weekly blog entry of approximately 250 words on a topic of his or her choice. Each student was also assigned to comment on two classmates' posts each week. In interviews that followed the blogging project, students expressed positive attitudes toward writing blog entries and receiving comments and feedback on their blog entries. One student voiced the belief that responding to others' blog entries is helpful in developing the ability to judge one's own writing.

Gedera (2011) suggested that weblogs be used as part of the process writing approach for the purpose of giving and receiving feedback from peers. Gedera pointed to feedback offered in blog comments as less threatening than feedback delivered using a red pen or comments written in the margins of a document. The author encouraged instructors to give students peer feedback guidelines to use when offering comments to their classmates.

Yih-Rueh (2006) researched the effectiveness of a blog-based learning tool, called Learning Blogs. As part of this study, students and their teacher blogged both in warm-up activities and in the lesson review. Students reported that blogging had promoted interactive discussion and helped them understand the target learning activities, while the teacher concluded that responding to the students' blogs had been helpful in evaluating course instruction and in planning future instruction.

Bakar, Latif, and Ya'acob (2010) sought to examine the effectiveness of using blogs in ESL instruction. The sample consisted of 197 undergraduate ESL students who had limited or very limited English proficiency. Students were required, as part of their coursework, to create a blog and use this blog to introduce themselves to two, three, or four other group members and then to discuss assigned topics, drawing on readings as a basis for discussion. The researchers created a questionnaire that used a four-point Likert Scale. Participants indicated a positive attitude toward using blogging in instruction. Over ninety percent of the students rated blogging as a useful learning tool.

Research has examined many angles of blogging as an instructional tool. As instructors consider whether to implement blogging in their curriculum, it is worthwhile for them to read about similar projects and their outcomes. While research has identified challenges that are presented when blogs are used in the classroom, the majority of research findings support the use of blogs in order to achieve multiple learning objectives.

Methodology

This qualitative study investigated how blogs are being used in the ESL classroom, how blogs might be used effectively in the ESL classroom, and the instructional implications of using blogs in the ESL curriculum. Graduate education students at a small private university in the northeastern part of the United States were invited to complete a

survey about blogging in the ESL classroom. They were not required to blog or lead blogging activities with students as part of this research study; they were only asked to provide self-reported perceptions of blogging as a tool to use in the instruction of English language learners. There was a 60% participation rate. Twenty of the thirty-three students who received an invitation to participate completed the survey. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 45.

Data

All participants reported that they had blogged as part of their coursework; 85% of participants considered blogs to be an effective instructional tool. In an open-ended question, participants were asked, based on their blogging experience as a student and/or as a teacher, to make suggestions that might optimize the use of blogs as instructional tools. More than half of the participants recommended that the instructor spend adequate time introducing blogs and explaining how they work and also detailing the rules and expectations for how blogs will be used in the instructional activity.

Multiple participants named clear criteria as essential to successful instructional blogging. Two participants noted that it is important to ensure that blogs are easily accessible. One participant advised that the instructor should anticipate challenges and problems in order to be prepared to address them. Some participants suggested that the instructor should have a blog that serves as a model, and the instructor's blog should be easy to access. One participant proposed that a master list of all students' blogs and their links should be created for use during the class activities.

Over half of the participants wrote that consistent participation is important. One participant followed a call for consistent participation with this explanation, "If blogs are used consistently, students can build on what they have learned before. If blogs are only used sometimes, students forget how to use them, and the technology becomes the focus, instead of the content and the writing." Participants stressed that blog topics should focus on relevant information that warrants discussion. "Nothing is more frustrating than a blog prompt that is about a topic that's pointless to discuss," one participant wrote. Finally, eight responses mentioned teacher monitoring. One response urged, "Teachers need to monitor what students are doing on blogs so that blogs are being used properly and so that the learning community is supported and developed." Participants also named parent involvement as a way to optimize the use of blogs as an instructional tool.

After completing their field experience, participants were asked to share their observations regarding challenges of using blogs in classroom instruction. Participants identified limited access to computers as the biggest challenge. Numerous participants also pointed to censoring software that school districts sometimes use that might block websites that teachers had planned to use in blogging projects. Participants cited organization and management as a challenge. "It's a lot of work to organize a blogging activity for students and to manage it well," reflected one participant. Another expressed a fear about the "lack of control over what's posted." One participant stated that a major challenge was that the adult students who were involved in the blogging project, "really didn't understand what blogs were."

Participants were asked to name reasons that instructors do not use blogs in instruction. Sixteen responses pointed to instructors either not being knowledgeable about the technology or being intimidated by the technology. One participant said that the teacher who was observed reported a desire to “not want to overwhelm students with content and technology together.” Furthermore, ten responses suggested that many teachers are unsure of the effectiveness of blogs. Specifically, one participant shared that teachers stated they were not sure if blogs would work well with younger students. Six participants wrote about instructors making choices to not use blogs, because there were other ways that the same instructional goals could be met. Fifteen participants reported that lack of computers and lack of access to computers with the Internet was a major factor that prevented teachers from doing blogging activities with students. Eight participants identified time constraints as a reason that teachers do not use blogs in instruction. Four participants cited teachers’ concerns that blogs would be difficult to manage. Additionally, four survey responses pointed to worries that students might post inappropriate content, and one participant named concerns that blog content is not always credible. One response voiced the opinion that blogs were not being used because they were no longer new and appealing.

Participants were asked to report the amount of access that English language learners had to computers at school. Twenty percent of participants reported that student computers are in the ESL classroom and are always available for student use. Sixty percent of participants described ESL students’ access to computers as “adequate.” Most noted that computers can be used almost anytime if planning is adequate. The planning process most often involves reserving time in advance in a school library or a computer lab. Twenty percent of participants reported that English language learners had either limited or no access to computers in school.

The questionnaire invited participants to list blog activities that they hope to use with students in the future. Eight participants shared that they hope to use blogs to allow students to respond to books or articles they have read, and three participants stated that they hope to use blogs as electronic writing portfolios for students. Seven participants wrote that they desire to use blogs in order to give students the opportunity to write personal reflections on their learning. Peer editing was suggested by a participant who explained that an initial piece of writing would be posted, and comments would then guide the student writer to edit and improve the text. Four participants noted that they plan to require students to post assignments to blogs. Three participants expressed that blogs could be a place for students to share their experiences and feelings, and three other participants wanted blogs to be a venue for “free writes.” Eight participants conveyed a hope to use blogs to promote group discussions, and six participants stated that they hope that group projects could be facilitated through blogging. Debates were named as possibly being accomplished through blogs by three participants, while six participants saw a possibility for reflection on current events via blogs. Two participants wrote that blogs could be a place for sharing information, and two other participants expressed that tutoring could occur with blogs as the medium. Keypals projects, in which students are partnered with other students from a different location to engage in regular written communication, were named by two participants.

Additionally, participants shared the idea of blogs being a way for students to get to know each other, a resource area for students to find out work that is missed when they are not in class, a space for field trip reflections to occur, and a resource for posting and sharing videos along with text. Some participants wrote extended responses, detailing how they hope to use blogs in order to accomplish learning goals via these project ideas.

Discussion

Participants provided overwhelmingly positive responses to the use of blogging as an instructional tool based on their use of blogs as graduate students and their observation of blogging use in the ESL classroom during their required field experience sessions. At the same time, participants recognized that there are many challenges to using blogs with English language learners as a part of classroom instruction. Despite these challenges, the graduate students had many ideas for how to optimize the use of blogs as an instructional tool and reported a desire to use blogs for many learning projects in their future teaching.

When providing ideas for how to optimize the use of blogs, over half of the participants recommended that the instructor spend adequate time explaining blogs and how they work and explaining the rules and expectations for how blogs will be used. These suggestions were made based on observation and participation in blogging activities that were successful and unsuccessful. Not everyone is familiar with blogging, and even those who have read blogs before or who have contributed to blogs in the past may not be aware of appropriate blog use in an educational setting. If instructors want blogging to be a worthwhile learning activity, they must specifically address the goals of the blogging project, and they must spell out rules and the expectations so that students can participate with a thorough understanding of what they should do in order to be successful.

Similarly, when introducing blogs to students, it is helpful if the instructor can offer a blog as a model. Since technology use becomes easier with repetition and practice, consistent participation is paramount. When students are asked to regularly post on blogs and comment on classmates' blogs, they can focus on the academic content, as the process of using the technology becomes routine. Regular dialogue via blogs also will allow for discussions to be deepened. Blog discussions will further student learning when topics are interesting and engaging. It is crucial that teachers monitor students' actions on blogs in order to guide students to participate and interact in ways that are respectful of all learners and that lead to heightened learning experiences.

The reality is that there are many challenges to using blogs in the classroom. In this research study, participants identified challenges and noted that these challenges must be considered and acknowledged when planning to use blogging for instructional purposes. The required field experience that graduate students at this university complete allows them to see what educators are doing in the classroom and to discuss the instructional decisions that experienced ESL teachers are making as they deliver daily instruction to students. This first-hand observation and these conversations with teachers prepare them by exposing them to the types of situations that they will likely encounter in future ESL teaching positions.

In addition, participants identified limited access to computers as the biggest challenge. This lack of available resources makes it necessary for educators to consider alternative ways to approach classroom blogging, and possible ideas are a rotating blog schedule for students and the option for students to complete blog assignments either at home or at a public library. Each teacher must assess the resources available in his or her current institution and make decisions based on what students can realistically accomplish with the tools that are available to them. It is evident that communication with institutional personnel, including technology staff, is essential. As numerous participants pointed to censoring software that school districts sometimes use as a problem, blocking websites that teachers planned to use in blogging projects, educators should consult with technology staff prior to beginning a blogging project so that they know what sites may be used. It is likely that technology personnel will work with teachers to change network settings if there is a sound pedagogical reason that a website should be made available to students.

The challenges discussed above account for many of the instances in which blogging is not used in instruction. Of course, lack of available technology and blocked websites will lead to teachers choosing other learning activities or deciding to abandon blog projects. It was a key finding that 84% of participants pointed to instructors either not being knowledgeable about the technology or being intimidated by the technology. This finding demonstrates a need for more professional development that addresses what blogs are and how they might be used in the classroom, along with support from technology staff and administration as teachers make their first attempts at using blogging as part of classroom instruction.

As teachers learn to use blogs, they should also learn about the effectiveness of blogs as an educational tool, as this will give them reason to explore the possibilities that blogs afford to learners. In the end, if educators are going to use blogs in the classroom, they must be confident that blogs will further student learning and lead students to attain learning objectives. Teachers should include blogging in their classroom activities only if they find that it is an effective way to accomplish learning objectives, because a technology tool should never be used simply because it is available. Instructors are obligated to think of their learners and how these students might best acquire the knowledge and skills that comprise the course curriculum. Blogging is one pedagogical tool that deserves attention, as its inclusion as a learning activity could indeed be an ideal avenue to facilitate student learning. As time constraints are a very real concern for teachers, the amount of time spent on blogging should be considered, and teachers should communicate with others who are doing similar learning activities in order to gain insight on the best ways to manage time when using technology in this way.

Participants eagerly shared ways that they hope to use blogs in their future teaching. The project ideas that were suggested constitute valuable learning experiences for students that use higher-order thinking skills and encourage active and interactive learning, such as responding to articles and books that have been read, reflecting on one's own learning, and engaging in thought-provoking discussions and debates. The opportunity to use blogs for peer editing and for "free writes" could advance students' writing skills, as students are motivated to write for an authentic audience of readers.

Culture and ideas can be exchanged via keypals projects, while remediation can happen via tutoring on blogs. Very practical ideas were suggested, including using blogs in order to post missing work for students who are absent and using blogs as a platform for students to get to know each other. The graduate students who participated in this research study clearly see blogs as tools to accomplish various instructional goals, and they have formulated ideas for classroom blog use that will guide them in their future instructional planning.

Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed and the results of this study, the researchers believe that blogs have merit as an instructional tool in the ESL classroom. Blogs allow students “to participate actively in their own learning, determine their learning goals, and share their knowledge in order to develop their own understanding of the target learning activities” (Bakar, Latif, & Ya’acob, 2010, p. 122). In this research study, participants expressed an overwhelmingly positive view of blogs as instructional tools that can augment classroom learning. Teachers recognized the multiple challenges that exist when planning and implementing blogging in educational settings. The graduate students who participated in this study shared many ideas that they have for ways that blogging can be used in their future teaching of ESL. Research that has shown positive effects of classroom blogging projects supports the assertion that blogs have a place in the ESL classroom.

Further research should be conducted in order to determine how blogs might be best used in instruction. It would be worthwhile to focus on the unique features of blogging as an instructional tool, examining how blogs support student learning in ways that are not possible with other instructional methods. As Grami (2012) posited, “Online blogging seems to address specific issues usually ignored in traditional ESL writing classes” (p. 47). As teachers and students use blogs in ESL instruction, the effectiveness of this instructional tool should be evaluated and discussed in the educational community.

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