



The Reading Matrix © 2009
Volume 9, Number 2, September 2009

Effectiveness of Blogging to Practice Reading at a Freshman EFL Program

Bertha Leiva de Izquierdo

Universidad Simón Bolívar

Leticia Esteves Reyes

Universidad Simón Bolívar

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this action research is to explore the effectiveness of blogs to promote frequent extra reading practice in a freshman EFL science and technology reading program at a public university. Sociocultural theory and the revival of Vygotsky's constructivism have made us rethink how to approach the learning-teaching process in the twenty-first century. Are we really helping our students acquire skills that will be crucial in their future? Are we using learning resources that will make them connect socioculturally and learn from the interactions among themselves and others? Many of the low proficiency students in this program do not have regular access to a computer and have not worked with blogs before. There is not only a perceived socioeconomic divide but differences in skills and knowledge about computers are also quite noticeable. The materials and activities of three class blogs used during the 2007-2008 academic year will be presented, as well as the interactions that went on among students. Results show that these online social environments are very well perceived by most students and that they are quite effective when new ways of learning outside the traditional classroom are explored.

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology in language teaching and learning has been around for many years. Language labs, tape recorders, overhead projectors, TV sets and videos date from the 60's and 70's. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) appeared on the scene in the early 80's with the use of computer programs while the integration of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) came to be known in the 90's moving ahead from static language programs to the dynamic World Wide Web and the so-called web-based tools. Nowadays with the tools of the Web 2.0 geared toward individuals and groups, educational institutions, universities specifically, have to take advantage of the easy to handle and high potential of these technologies which seem to fit perfectly in project collaboration and group learning (Swain, 2008).

Undoubtedly, the use of ICTs has become increasingly important in our classrooms as part of the English Language Teaching practice (ELT), as well as in our students' and our own

lives. Why is that? How many of us start our daily routine by checking email accounts or reading on-line newspapers? How many people use different search engines like www.google.com, www.altavista.com, and www.yahoo.com on a daily basis? How many people use *Yahoo* or *Hotmail Messenger* and *Skype* to communicate live with coworkers, friends, relatives, students, and even unknown people via the web? How many of us have joined online social networks such as *Facebook*, *Bebo*, *Flixter*, *hi5* or *Ning* to create communities of people who share interests and activities or to bring together groups of people who are fascinated by exploring other people's interests and activities?

Apart from the widespread use of the Internet and its applications, the number of hours students spend on line daily and their abilities to multi-task cannot go unnoticed. Their common practice and sometimes obsessive use of video games off and on-line is striking; and the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not is much wider day by day. There is an increasingly marked socio-economical difference between people who use computers and those who do not—a phenomenon experts in the area refer to as “digital divide.” According to Lu (2001) “there are great disparities in opportunity to access the Internet and the information and educational/business opportunities tied to this access between developed and developing countries” (p. 1). In this observable fact, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, at least with regard to technology, as the gap between the two widens. The idea originally came about when comparisons were made in Internet access between rural and urban areas of the U.S. (Bouza, 2003; Bucy, 2000; Robinson & Nie, 2003)

There are manifold answers to the question of why the Internet plays an important role in our daily routines, and more importantly in this article, the reasons why ICTs have gained importance in the practice of ELT. Some of these reasons have been discussed by Dudeney and Hockly (2007). First, it is a fact that Internet access and broadband are becoming cheaper and more widely available by means of cable, satellite or wireless connections either at home, at work, at educational institutions or at cyber cafes. Second, since we live in the age of computers, many young learners are being born and are growing up with technology as a natural and integrated part of their lives. Third, as an international language, English is being used in contexts mediated by technology, especially the Internet, as it provides us teachers with new opportunities for authentic tasks as well as a wide range of ready-made ELT materials. Many textbooks and teacher resources come with additional materials that encourage the use of technology in the classroom either by incorporating interactive CD ROMS or by providing links to various websites where students can reinforce their L2 skills even outside the classroom without necessarily having to abandon the learning environment. All of these ideas have come up from the fact that “by providing digital students with opportunities to learn in ways that satisfy their needs, they will become more engaged in the learning process and in realizing their potential” (Bedenbaugh, 2006).

With the presence of the Internet and computers almost everywhere and in many learning environments, it is hard to believe that there are still people and professionals from different fields, teachers included, who are afraid of using technology. These people are called “technophobes” while the term “dot com generation” has been coined for those who have grown up using technology and who feel at ease and very confident in front of a computer. As opposed to “technophobes,” technology enthusiasts are known as “technogeeks.” Now, as educators we must ask ourselves: Where do we stand? Where do we belong?

Prensky (2001a, 2001b, 2005) refers to today's students as “digital natives” since they have no particular accent when speaking about technology: “They are fluent in the digital

language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (Prensky, 2005, p. 8). On the other hand, he also refers to the “digital immigrants” as those who have come to the world of technology a little later: “We have adopted many aspects of the technology, but just like those who learn another language later in life, we retain an ‘accent’ because we still have one foot in the past. We will read a manual, for example, to understand a program before we think to let the program teach itself. Our accent from the pre-digital world often makes it difficult for us to effectively communicate with our students” (Prensky, 2005, p. 8). In many cases, experienced teachers are categorized as *digital immigrants* while young learners are considered *digital natives*.

Jukes (2007) from the InfoSavvy Group has pointed out that “by being DSL - speaking digital as a second language - many of us are distracted and disoriented by the multiple, simultaneous, hyperlinked information sources inherent to the new technologies” (p. 4). He and McCain (2008) have come to the conclusion that the disconnection between “digital natives,” (today’s students) and “digital immigrants,” (many adults) results from poor communication. They speculate that most misunderstandings come from the differences between how digital students learn and how non-digital teachers teach. After an extensive research that must be followed by careful reflection, they have listed some differences between digital native learners (DNL) and digital immigrant teachers (DIT). DNLs would rather get information fast from multiple multimedia sources while DITs prefer to get it slowly from limited sources. DNLs prefer parallel processing and multitasking but DITs promote singular processing and single tasking. The first favor processing pictures, sounds and video before text while the second choose text over pictures, sounds and video. DNLs are used to random access to hyperlinked multimedia information but DITs give information in a linear way, logically and sequentially. While DNLs would rather network and interact with many people simultaneously, DITs prefer students to work independently. DNLs want instant rewards but DITs give delayed gratification. Digital native learners prefer learning that is pertinent, immediately useful and enjoyable but digital immigrant teachers prefer to teach to the syllabus and standardized tests.

Similarly, researchers from the [Berkman Center for Internet and Society](#) at Harvard Law School and the Research Center for Information Law at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland, who have been doing research on Digital Natives (DN), claim that not all youth are necessarily DN and that being a DN has more to do with a common global culture, with certain

characteristics and experiences related to how they interact with technologies, information, one another and with others. This group of researchers point out that even subjects who were not ‘born digital’ can be connected and updated as much as the younger crowd, some of whom might not be complete digital natives.

As teachers of the 21st Century, we must visualize the continuum of “technophobes and technogeeks” as well as that of the “digital natives and the digital immigrants” as Dudeney and Hockly (2007) point out, and we must figure out where we stand between these two extremes or if we have stepped on the spaces around as clearly illustrated by [Wesley Fryer](#) in Figure 1.¹

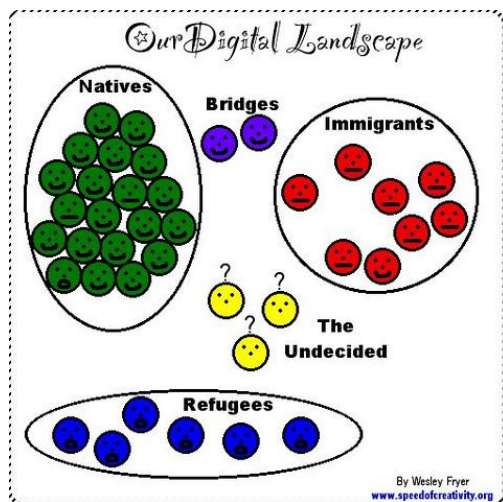


Figure 1. Our Digital Landscape by [wesleyfrier](#) (Used with Permission)

From the times of Paulo Freire to our days, we have wanted to empower students, give them more freedom and responsibility about their own learning, and provide them with the right environment that would foster sociocultural and collaborative interaction, promote autonomous learning and help them learn to learn. The revival of Vygostky's ideas and the advent of constructivism and sociocultural theory have led us to rethink how we approach the teaching-learning process in the 21st Century and what the role of technology in education is. Are we truly helping our students learn and practice key skills that will allow them to successfully carry out successfully their professional, personal and social activities in the near future? Are we really using educational resources that can provide our students with opportunities to connect among themselves socioculturally and learn from the interactions between them and other groups?

WHY USE ICTs IN UNIVERSITY COURSES?

The UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (1998, Article 9) proposes that, in a world undergoing rapid changes, there is a perceived need for a new student-oriented vision of education in which the responsibility of higher education institutions is to prepare students to turn into up-to-date and highly motivated citizens who can analyze problems, look for possible solutions, think critically and accept social responsibilities. It states clearly that new educational practices will entail new ways of teaching and learning coupled with new methods of testing that will encourage memory capabilities as well as powers of comprehension, skills for practical work and creativity.

Article 11, referred to the Potential and Challenge of Technology, discusses how the rapid breakthroughs in ICTs will revolutionize the way knowledge is developed, acquired, and delivered in the near future by drawing attention to the fact that new technologies offer opportunities for innovation on course content and teaching methods and to broaden access to higher level learning.

This declaration proclaims that knowledge should be made accessible to everyone through the creation of new learning environments and by bridging distances, "...noting that, in making full use of ICTs for educational purposes, particular attention should be paid to removing the grave inequalities which exist among and also within the countries of the world with regards to access to new information and communication technologies and to the production of the corresponding resources" (Article 12, Section C, p. 12).

WHY USE ICTs IN LANGUAGE COURSES?

Second and foreign language teaching have been deeply impacted by ideas concerning learner centeredness, learner empowerment, learner autonomy, learner independence, learner awareness and learner motivation under a curricula designed following the principles of social interaction, collaboration, social constructivism and those of teaching our students how to learn. Pinkman (2005) says that "Once learners take responsibility for their learning, they will be more able to capitalize on learning environments both in and out of the classroom, hopefully making them life-long and efficient learners" (p. 12) which is exactly what higher education institutions worldwide have been pursuing since the 1998 UNESCO declaration.

As a result, the creation of environments that motivate our students to continue learning outside the classroom has become a responsibility for foreign language teachers, especially those teaching at university level. So, why not take advantage of the fact that ICTs and Internet tools can be adopted or adapted to provide students with opportunities to learn, practice and foster communication and interaction beyond the boundaries of their classroom?

WHY BLOGS?

Weblogs or blogs are online personal journals which have been in cyberspace since 1998. In August of 1999 the release of *Blogger*, a free blog hosting service, led to the rapid growth of these sites (Blood, 2002). Later, blogs extended into various professional areas especially journalism and business. The cover story of the first issue of Fortune magazine in 2005 introduces “10 tech trends to watch in 2005,” and blogs rank as the first one. “According to blog search-engine and measurement firm Technorati,” Fortune reports, “23,000 new weblogs are created every day – or about one every three seconds” (p. 34). No wonder the author claims that blogs have become a force that business cannot afford to ignore.

Conejo (2006) refers to a blog as a website where regular updating takes place. The posting of various entries is arranged in chronological order, usually published from the latest to the oldest. Blogs may share a specific theme and their content can be collected and posted by one or more authors. They are also used to organize links to other webpages which may host videos and podcasts. Blogs generally include the option of allowing members and visitors to comment on the posts, thus promoting the interaction between users without the need to open discussion forums or threads.

In this particular experience, blogs were used as open source and easy to handle webtools. Even people with little technical background can take part in the creation, managing and maintenance of a blog. Blogs allow teachers and students to upload content pertinent to their courses on the web and reach out to people providing opportunities to promote student-teacher, student-student, and student-others interactions. Another reason for using blogs is that posts are published instantly, without much time investment. Blogs are accessible to all who might be interested in making contributions in a relatively lengthy period of time, without moving physically or attending face-to-face (f2f) classes. Besides, blogs have proven to be of great use in foreign language courses because images, songs, podcasts, and videos can be uploaded so students can be exposed to them in a real multimedia environment (Campbell, 2003, 2004; Dieu, 2004; Grewling, 2004).

According to Grewling (2004) the biggest reason for using blogs in language teaching is the way they are set up because they invite participation and have the potential to democratize the classroom since each student is given the chance to participate equally. Grewling (2004) also brings up the fact that issues like “shyness” become less relevant in a blog than in f2f situations and, furthermore, that quieter students’ participation increases in online environments. Blogs can also be accessed practically anytime and anywhere so contributors can post and comment at their own convenience and determine their own pace and level of contribution (Grewling, 2004). This same author and Pinkman (2005) state that blogs give students more control over their own learning, and, when created by students themselves, blogs can also give students the ownership of a personal space, a sense of belonging that is not so easily achieved in f2f environments. Parashar Panday (2007) assures that blogs offer many benefits to our students since they help to

enhance the skills of communicating, sharing, analyzing, reflecting, reading, writing, keeping records and promote collaboration among grown-ups. Then why not use blogs in our foreign language classrooms, even if the main skill to practice is restricted to reading?

The present study explored how blogging could be implemented to practice reading skills at a freshman EFL program and to measure its effectiveness in that particular context. Data was also collected on students' participation as well as their perception about this educational resource.

THE STUDY

This action research was carried out throughout a full academic year with five intact sections selected at random from a pool of 25 sections for a total population of around 625 students registered in a freshman EFL reading program. One class blog was created for each of the three course levels and was developed as the course progressed depending on the needs and perceived interests of the students, course content and reading strategies to be practiced.

Before presenting the study in detail, it is necessary to describe the EFL reading program which is a requirement for all engineering and basic science students at this university. The USB First-Year English Program's main objective is the teaching of reading strategies which will allow all freshman students to understand technical and scientific texts written in English. The aim is to enable them to apply such strategies in their professional studies. In fact, the general objective of the Program states that: "At the end of the courses, students will be able to read technical and scientific texts with fluency and precision, using the most appropriate strategy to that effect in a given moment." Even if reading comprehension is the main objective, the other three linguistic skills—aural comprehension, speaking and writing—are used as reinforcers. Professors speak English in class and motivate students to practice it as much as they can.

In order to allow for a better understanding of the data in this study, the materials used in the courses will be briefly described. The program is made up of three courses which last twelve weeks each. In each course, there are four hours of reading practice a week for a total of forty-eight hours each term. A reading strategies guide is used during the first two courses to help students become aware, practice and develop reading strategies such as identifying the topic, topic sentence, main idea and details; distinguishing major and minor details; understanding referents, compound words and signal words, etc. A reading guide is compiled for each level containing authentic scientific and technical texts selected by language department professors. Worksheets with exercises developed by them are also included in each guide. In the first two courses, the texts are selected according to rhetorical functions frequently found in scientific writings such as description, definition, classification, comparison-contrast, chronology, process, cause-effect, hypothesis and argumentation. Practice in reading texts which contain such functions is carried out during the first and second trimesters. Worksheets supply practice for identifying the main and secondary ideas and the author's purpose. They also provide practice in vocabulary, synonyms, cognates and false cognates, guessing meaning from context, practicing metacognitive skills and completing graphic organizers, among other activities.

In the third level, the reading guide is structured into three main topics: the universe, the evolution of man and artificial intelligence. This course provides more extensive reading with longer texts for the expected application of the skills practiced by students in the two previous courses. Parallel to the use of these reading guides, there is audiovisual lab material specifically

designed to go along with scientific audiovisual material selected according to rhetorical functions for the second course, and to themes for the third course. There is one lab session every other week in the fourth hour of class.

THE METHOD

Participants

A total of 119 female and male undergraduate first-year students with an age range from 17 to 22 at Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas, Venezuela participated in this study. They belonged to 5 intact classes selected at random and all of which had access to the three class blogs, one for each level, that we know of, since each blog was public and invited former students to visit the next blog, even if they were in a different class section.

Instruments

Class Blogs

During the first week of every term, a class blog was opened at [Blogger](#). Several links related to the rhetorical functions or the content of each course and links for reading practice were posted in the sidebar. The first three blog posts included a general welcome message, instructions on how to write comments to the entries and a slideshow about the brain, its features and how it affects learning. From there on, instructors selected topics and activities to reinforce concepts covered in class or additional materials to extend the content of a specific topic or articles that would call students' attention.

As the academic year progressed, each new group of students was more willing to participate actively in the blog and made more efforts to post their comments in English by themselves, or with the help of friends or family members. This information was mentioned by some students in class with no negative reinforcement or prohibition from the part of teachers. Students were free to write either in Spanish or English without additional credit for writing in EFL.

Instructors frequently mentioned topics in the blog posts and motivated students who had read the posts or done the activities to share their experiences with the class. The number of comments was counted for each student at the end of each course and the one with the highest number got the top grade for that section of the course evaluation, which was never more than 5%. The rest of the students got a corresponding grade according to their comments. Questionnaires were completed by students in the second and third courses during the last two weeks of the term.

Each blog contained widgets: an online dictionary, a world map, links to other websites, and a Cbox chat board used to post quick and brief messages to the class. Students became used to writing in the chat area whenever they had a question or wanted help from the teacher or classmates.

Course 1 (ID1-111): “Keeping in Touch: Our Class Cyberspace to Stay Connected”
Sep-Dec 2007

The [class blog](#) was opened to 48 students who belonged to two intact groups. The evaluation sheet for this course stated that five “extra” points would be given if students made contributions to the class blog by recommending sites to improve reading, sharing interesting materials, making comments to blog entries, giving advice to classmates, writing blog posts or anything students could think of and which would benefit the group. At the end of the course the blog had 50 posts, 228 comments—mostly written in Spanish—1603 visits, 7 documents to be downloaded, 6 links in the sidebar, and a place to find content (www.answers.com) plus 112 exchanges in the Cbox.

Although the course was structured around the rhetorical functions of definition, description, comparison and contrast and classification, some of the topics in the posts were intended to make students become aware of their learning strategies in general, their EFL reading strategies in particular, how they used dictionaries and how to go about learning vocabulary. Other topics were about how to write comments in the blog, how the brain works, sites for reading practice and formal communications from university authorities regarding cancellation of classes and exams due to the political situation of the country before the referendum on changes to the national constitution on December 2nd. Most posts were written in English and a few of them in Spanish. Sometimes key words had their translation in Spanish in parenthesis or had a link to its meaning. Since this is the first course in this reading program and students lack vocabulary in English, it was decided to have a tool which would translate the words of the blog into Spanish if students wanted to read it in their native language or check their understanding of some words from the context. It was freely provided by *Lingro* and it works by providing the translation of unknown words at one click (see Figure 2 for a post sample from this blog and some students’ comments).

Figure 2. Sample of ID1-111 Blog Post and Comments

The screenshot shows a Blogger blog post. The main content area features a video player with the title "Limitations of the Brain". The video player has a progress bar at 19/45 and a "slideshare" logo. Below the video player, there is a post footer that reads "POSTED BY BERTA AT 7:44 PM 13 COMMENTS LINKS TO THIS POST".

Below the video player, there are two comments in Spanish:

dani.usb said...
 La página está realmente completa. Contiene muchos datos que son de ayuda, no sólo para la materia de inglés, sino que es de mucha ayuda en otros aspectos. También tiene muchas lecturas que ayudan a enriquecer nuestro vocabulario de inglés.
 Daniela Jiménez!
 October 7, 2007 8:09 PM

monik said...
 I think the slide is very interesting and attractive, it contain schematic information and it use engaging colors, this help us to memorize the contents.
 The theme "Help your brain help you" is very important and adequate at the matter because it toast us the opportunity of to care our brain and use it 100 percent.
 The slide has information about the tips for to memorize and to study better and I add to listen my favorite music while I study for concentrate me better.
 October 8, 2007 4:01 PM

Below the comments, there is a comment from an anonymous user:

anonymous said
 Listo
 Internet

As mentioned above, there was an irregular situation in the country from the end of October until the beginning of December 2007. Classes were cancelled frequently due to students' involvement in civil actions and the blog was the means to stay in touch. When there was news that could be of interest to students (institutional messages or actions from the student movement) it was posted in the blog, as seen in Figure 3. Activities were assigned in the blog which students completed on paper and left them in the teacher's university mailbox. Answers were posted in the blog and the teacher kept a record of completed assignments for each student. Most of the assignments came from the two guides regularly used by students (a reading strategies guide and a scientific and technical texts reading guide with exercises). Since class hours turned into consultation hours, students with doubts or difficulties went to the teacher's office to be individually tutored.

Figure 3. Sample of News of Interest to Students




Course 2 (ID1-112): “Let’s Keep in Touch: EST Course for University Students” Jan-Mar 2008

This [class blog](#) was opened to 21 students who belonged to just one course section. In the evaluation sheet for the course it was stated that 10% of the total course evaluation was going to be made up of attendance, classwork, homework and contributions to the class blog throughout the term. Students could contribute to the class blog by recommending sites to improve reading, sharing interesting materials, making comments to blog entries, giving advice to classmates, writing blog posts or anything students could think of and which would benefit and/or be useful to the group.

At the end of the course the blog had 25 posts, 196 comments, 1828 visits, 124 Cbox exchanges and 19 links in the sidebar. Most posts were very closely related to the content covered in class which was structured around these rhetorical functions: chronology, process, cause-effect, hypothesis and argumentation. For example, if the general area was on chronology and there had been a reading about the life of Einstein, the blog post would have a short video about the scientist with a question that had students compare the information in the reading to the one in the video. Students would then write their answers in the comments area of that particular post. If there had been a reading on process and what happens to our body when we drink alcohol, for instance, there would be a link or more to readings on alcoholism in college and how to avoid it. If the opportunity arose to link activities to real situations, a post was written such as the time when the teacher had back pain and students had to watch a slideshow to determine the cause and give recommendations to relieve the pain (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4. Sample of Real-life Situation Post


No class Monday March 3rd: Back pain

 listen now

Slide show: Causes of back pain

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6

PREVIOUS | NEXT



Strains, sprains and spasms
The most common cause of back pain is an injury to a muscle (strain) or a ligament (sprain). Strains and sprains can occur for many reasons, including improper lifting, excess body weight and poor posture. Strains and sprains can also develop from hauling around a heavy handbag or sleeping at an awkward angle. As a pivot point for turning at the waist, the lower back is especially vulnerable to muscle strains (shown here).
Sometimes a strain or sprain causes immediate back pain. In other cases, soreness and stiffness come later. An injured muscle may also "knot up." This muscle spasm is your body's way of immobilizing the affected area to prevent further damage.

© Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. All rights reserved.

I got a mechanical contracture in my lower back which probably resulted from sleeping at a wrong angle (I had to take care of my mom all this week at a hospital and I had to sleep in a chair for two nights).

I have an acute **back pain** and a hard time trying to sit. So, this is the deal:

- 1) We will not have class on Monday 3rd but we will meet next Wednesday, probably in the big lab second floor, to watch the video of this week and then have class.
- 2) I expect EVERYONE to have read and completed the reading and exercises of "What happens when you drink?" on a separate piece of paper to hand in.
- 3) Go to the **Mayo Clinic link** to watch a slideshow on back pain. Identify if what I have is a spasm, a strain or a sprain according to the cause. Tell me what recommendations I should follow to relieve my pain. Write your answer and explanation to your answer in the "comments" area of this post.

An innovative tool of this particular class blog was a text to speech function for every blog post supplied freely by "Odiogo." Students orally made comments in class about this tool, especially because there were words in the posts that they did not know how to pronounce or because they could read and listen to the post content simultaneously. Another tool that students enjoyed was the widget for songs (see Figure 5). Since the topic was related to cause and effect and hypothesis, and some students had already mentioned a connection between songs and language learning, a post was written about this connection and one's favorite song or kind of music. Students were asked about this and some provided their favorite song names, which were

then embedded in the post. In the next entry there were three online articles about the “song stuck in the head phenomenon” and the exercise asked to identify the problem, the hypothesis to explain the cause of the problem and to select a fact and an opinion in the texts. This exercise was similar to the ones students completed in class. Most of the posts would present a topic by means of an online reading, slideshow or video, and would have a question students would answer. For example: “Did you find something surprising, alarming, untrue, speculative, and interesting in the slideshow? Write your thoughts in the comments area.” Most of the comments were still written in Spanish, although there were some students who made an effort to write in English.

Figure 5. Post on Music, Language Learning and Their Favorite Songs

8 . 3 . 0 8

Songs and Language learning

listen now

Adriana mentioned in a comment last January the use of **captioned TV** to improve reading in English. Then Fabiana said songs could be helpful too. Now I want to check with all of you how much you think songs influence language learning.

Has it ever happened to you that you hear a catchy song and then it is in your mind for the whole day or the whole night and you might even wake up listening to the song playing inside your head? That is the song-stuck-in-my-head phenomenon or last song syndrome mentioned in the next post.

Educator Tim Murphey conducted an analysis of the lyrics of a large corpus of pop songs and found that they have several features that help second language learners. They contain common, short words and many personal pronouns (94% of the songs had a first person, I, referent and are written at about a fifth-grade level); the language is conversational (imperatives and questions made up 25% of the sentences in the corpus); time and place are usually imprecise (except for some folk ballads); the lyrics are often sung at a slower rate than words are spoken with more pauses between utterances; and there is repetition of vocabulary and structures. These factors allow learners to understand and relate to the songs (Murphey, 1992). A further benefit of pop song lyrics is that their meanings are fluid, and, like poetry, allow for many different interpretations (Moi, 1994).

Find lyrics to songs [here](#). Which is your favorite song of all times, by the way?

Mine? I love songs by Linking Park but "Under Pressure" by Queen is my most favorite one. I can listen to it over and over again for hours. See its lyrics with translation [here](#). To listen to it, press the yellow play button.

Under pressure - Queen

Berta

Oasis-03-Wonderwall

Jorge S.

34 U2- Window in the Sky

Luis V.

Rihanna - Dont stop H

Justo

James Blunt - Goodbye

Annelys

Plain White T's - Hey!

Gilberto

Hello goodbye - Here I am

Luis S.

Blind Meilon - No Rain

Reinaldo

POSTED BY BERTA AT 12:41 AM

19 COMMENTS

LINKS TO THIS POST

Course 3 (ID1-113): “In Cyber Touch. On Origins: Universe, Life and Artificial Intelligence” Apr-Jul 2008

The [class blog](#) was opened to 51 students who belonged to two course sections. In the evaluation sheet for the course it was stated that attendance, classwork and homework from weeks 1 to 6 were worth 5% of the total grade and that attendance, classwork and homework from weeks 6 to 12 plus contributions to the class blog from weeks 1-12 were worth 5%.

At the end of the course the blog had 38 posts, 643 comments, 4221 visits, 121 Cbox exchanges and 15 links in the sidebar. Most of the posts were very closely related to the content covered in class: the origin of the universe, the origin of life, human evolution and artificial intelligence. Since content and thematic vocabulary and concepts are key elements to understand

the longer readings in this particular course, the class blog could provide for that and help students practice reading and even listening while building up the needed background knowledge and concept clarification. This blog had the largest number of comments and student interaction, involvement and motivation to participate compared to the other two class blogs. Students sent many links and recommended videos and sites for classmates to watch and visit. There were around twelve videos and a couple of slideshows with diverse topics related to the universe, evolution and artificial intelligence. Students exchanged ideas in the chat board, asked and answered questions, asked for help and offered help to peers to a higher degree than in the two previous class blogs.

Figure 6. Sample of Materials Provided by Students

4.6.08

Cartoon provided by Danilo and Hobbit by Solange

What's wrong with this cartoon according to the theory of evolution, eh? They said Lamarck's model was **flawed**, what does that mean?

Solange mentioned she had found an article on a "**Hobbit**" fossil and I was puzzled and wanted to find out if this is just a nickname, like Lucy from the Beatles song "Lucy in the sky with diamonds" popular in 1974, for an *Australopithecus* fossil. Did "**Lord of the Rings**" have something to do with it because they found it in 2004 and the movie was on?

And who is this **Taung child** guy they keep mentioning in pages 81 and 85? Was Lucy discovered before or after him?

Do you want to have some fun listening to the names of fossils? Check [this page](#). You will need a set of earphones, of course. BTW, can you find the name of the latest fossil found in 2006 in that page? Let's see who gets it first :-)

POSTED BY BERTA AT 6/04/2008 09:30:00 PM 4 COMMENTS LINKS TO THIS POST

LABELS: CARTOON, FOSSILS, HOBBIT, HUMAN EVOLUTION, TAUNG CHILD

1509
Jean-Baptiste Lamarck publishes his theory of evolution the year Darwin is born. His is the first to lay out a comprehensive (but flawed) model that attempts to explain how life evolves.

"Hey! Look! ... No hands!"

CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARIES ONLINE
Search

QUICK REPLIES FROM CLASSMATES OR TEACHER WHEN YOU NEED HELP

To see larger box, click here

4 Jun 08, 21:55
Berta: Gustavo, read about Lucy, "A look at the Past", part II

4 Jun 08, 21:45
Gustavo: Profesora no recuerdo la página de la lectura que me tocó, soy el grupo 2, me puede decir por favor???

4 Jun 08, 21:23
Freddy: Hello Teacher
D now I know how to post something... not easy at all xD but finally I got it, thx 4 ur help

4 Jun 08, 15:10
Berta: Voc 6.65. Check Dept. in blog post.

4 Jun 08, 14:11

Visitor locations
VISITORS
00001827
Click to see

Regarding students' participation, there was an increasing number of comments made in English in the third course. Some students mentioned they read the articles in the blog or watched the videos with family or friends who then helped them write the corresponding comments in English because they wanted to practice writing.

Questionnaires

Since the first course (September-December 2007) had an irregular situation that did not allow students and teacher to spend face-to-face time together, there was no chance to apply a class questionnaire which would have taken into account students' perception of the use of a class blog. In the second course (January-March 2008), a [paper and pencil questionnaire](#) in Spanish made up of 15 items was completed by the 22 students in this group. Although some

items of the questionnaire dealt with reading and vocabulary learning, there were six questions related to the class blog, specifically Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 12. These asked students for the frequency in which they checked the class blog and wrote comments; the type of Internet connection they had; if they found the blog useful, helpful, and difficult, etc.; if they learned vocabulary through the blog and, finally, there was an open request for recommendations on the use of blogs.

In the third course (April-July 2008) an [online questionnaire](#) in English was answered by 51 students. This questionnaire consisted of 10 questions and its main objective was to explore students' perception of the usefulness and effectiveness of the class blog as a learning aid in a reading course. We also wanted to know about students' previous experience with the net, the language they used, time spent online, how students felt about participating in a class blog, and the frequency of certain online activities during the course as well as their perception on how the blog helped them in their learning of EFL. The final open question invited students to include other comments and suggestion to help us use blogs more effectively in the future.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three sites themselves are the actual results of the experience for each class. The first blog is the one with the highest number of posts since this was the irregular trimester with frequent class cancellations due to the active involvement of subjects in the national student movement and the tense political situation of the country. Students mentioned they frequently checked the blog to keep updated on what was going on at the university, if departmental exams had been called off and what the assignments were. They would come to the instructor's office for consultation hours whenever they had doubts or felt lost because of the special conditions of that moment. It was the term with the highest number of students' visits to the instructor's office. It was also the group which used the instructor's office computer the most to read blog posts or write comments. In the second and third courses not many students came for consultation hours or used the instructor's office computer. In fact, no student used it in the third course. The blog with the highest number of comments and more active participation was the third course. The reason for this may be that at this level, students had already been acquiring and practicing reading strategies for more than six months; besides, this course is content based and may motivate students to learn more about specific topics where new discoveries are being made everyday and new theories proposed (the origin of the universe, the evolution of man, and artificial intelligence)

As could be noticed from the description of each class blog in the instruments' section, the percentage of the total evaluation varied in each course. In level one, blog participation accounted for an extra 5% while it was 10% of the total grade for the second course together with attendance and homework. In the case of the third course, it was just 5% of the grade along with the attendance and homework of the second part of the course. Even if the percentage kept narrowing down and was less significant each term, students' interactions, interest and comments increased each time.

The tool embedded in the blog which was most successful was the chat board, a place that students readily accepted and immediately used, especially when they needed help or wanted to share ideas with their classmates and teachers, as when the results of the national elections were known or when they were absent due to sickness, or had doubts about assignments or grades.

The [results of the survey for the second course](#) were as follows: many students knew what a blog was before the course began (73.7%), half of them had visited one or written a comment and 10.5% had their own blog. With reference to their access to the Internet, many (59.1%) had it at home with broadband but one third (31.8%) had no access where they lived but logged at Cybercafés, friends or relatives. Half indicated they had Internet experience and a few (9.1%) said they did not. As to the class blog, all students visited it with different degrees of frequency: some (13.6%) always checked it; half of them checked it many times and 22.7% sometimes. In the case of comments, although a few (4.8%) wrote them always, 33.3% wrote them many times and 42.9% sometimes. A significant number of students, from 77-86%, found the blog useful, interesting and helpful in practicing English. No one found the blog useless, unhelpful in learning English or having difficult content. Concerning vocabulary learning, although the blog was not the main activity selected by the majority, it did help some of them (33.3% ranked it first, 16.7% second and 25% third). Altogether, the blog was very positively perceived by most participants of the second course.

Regarding the [survey for the third course](#), after fifty-one ID1-113 students completed it online, the results showed that before the course, most students (88%) had had experience with the Internet: 86% had experience with emails, 76% with chats, 72% with social networks, but only 40% had had experience with blogs. Many students (62%) browsed the web in both languages while 34% did it in Spanish and very few (4%) used English to browse the web although most of them reported it would depend on the task. Concerning the time spent online, 26% of our students reported they spent more than 20 hours per week, 16% between 11-15 hours, and 24% 6-10. A percentage of 22% reported they spent only 1-5 hours online weekly. These results may be due to the kind of access they have to the Internet. Notice that 68% of our students have Internet access from home while another 18% get logged in at the university, cybercafés, friends or relatives. 78% of the population surveyed responded positively when they were told a blog would be part of the class; 6.4% felt worried because they had never worked with blogs before and 14.9% felt uninterested since they wanted to dedicate no extra time to English. Nevertheless, 66% checked the class blog regularly, 68% read the posts, 53% read the articles recommended in the posts while 56% watched the videos. Only 48% of our students wrote comments, 24% suggested links and additional materials, and just 22% wrote in the chat board.

When asked if the blog had helped them in the different tasks, most agreed that it had helped them learn content either by reading the articles, watching videos or doing the online activities. 83% reported the blog had helped them learn new vocabulary. 77.1% considered it helpful to practice reading outside the classroom while 51% thought the blog was useful to improve their writing skills. It is interesting to notice that 72.4% of this population agreed that the blog had helped them become more autonomous in their learning process and less dependent on the teachers. When posting in the blog, 25% of the students tried to do it in English, but 36% did not; and 38.6% sometimes used the target language. Among their comments and suggestions on what they thought might help use blogs more effectively in the future, four of the most striking comments were these:

- The blog is excellent to keep you informed of classes and a good way to motivate students. I did not have enough time to review all articles, but I think it is an excellent tool, well structured and very good for people who want to benefit/take advantage from it.
- The blog is a great idea. It is really necessary to communicate.

- The idea of the blog is great although sometimes a little ‘Tedious.’ However, it helps keep updated with class and the world.
- The blog seems a very useful tool, and although I gave no proper use to it, I think it greatly facilitates the understanding of the class contents.

In summary, ID1-113 students perceived the blog as a quite positive activity for the benefit of their English progress, especially in the areas of reading, writing and vocabulary building. From this experience, we found that the use of the class blog allowed for the:

- practice of reading outside the classroom.
- reading strategies reinforcement by means of additional exercises.
- acquisition, activation and development of knowledge about a given topic: content-based learning.
- motivation to continue reading about a given topic and learn something new about it.
- continuous interaction among classmates and teachers.
- help among peers.
- learning of how blogs and other online resources work (videos, dictionaries, games, etc.)
- creation of a sense of community and ownership of the website where the exchanges take place.
- establishment of a real audience who reads and writes about the given subjects which could be deemed personal, interesting.
- search for other sources of information in the net (search engines, pictures, articles, etc.)
- sound competition to see who is the first to clear classmate doubts or answer content questions in a given post.
- narrowing of the gap between those who do not have access to the Internet or have not used these social tools before and those who have. This would probably be a result of socioeconomic differences among users, a situation that could be improved with practice using these tools.
- students to become more autonomous in their learning processes.
- teacher to come to a middle ground between digital natives and digital immigrants.

Among some of the limitations of the study, we find that there was little access to the Internet for those students who did not have this service at home. However, teachers had several consultation hours so students could come to their offices to read the blog and write the corresponding comments. Online assignments also created additional pressure on students since there were extra tasks that limited their time to dedicate to other subjects. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about these tools causes initial fear to use them, and some students take longer to learn how to handle them, others are cautious or shy when writing comments as these would be read by their classmates. Another limitation is the dedication and time teachers are required to devote to the blog not only to find materials that will be interesting and motivating for the students, but also giving continuous feedback to students’ comments in order to maintain their attention, curiosity and willingness to participate in the blog.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this study demonstrate that the use of blogs to create an environment whereby students would interact socioculturally and actively to practice EFL beyond the traditional classroom has been effective in our freshman EST reading program. Results also reveal how blogs can help students share what they have learned and help one another as they become more autonomous in their own learning and less dependent on their teachers.

The data collected in both surveys helps us conclude that the creation of environments to motivate students learning beyond the classroom should be part of the role of technology in the 21st Century education and a responsibility for foreign language teachers who prepare students to think critically, take social responsibility, analyze problems and provide possible solutions to them. The results also seem to indicate that the use of ICTs to this end have turned into an effective way to help students practice the language, even if institutions do not provide the necessary resources or if some students have never handled webtools before.

Another important finding in this study is that the role of the teacher is crucial in the creation of new learning environments and in bridging distances between those who have wide access to technology and those who do not in an era where everybody needs technology since we seem to be heading towards a future of technology-mediated works. Therefore, educators must not feel comfortable when being categorized as “technophobes” or “digital immigrants” whose marked accent hinders communication with their students. On the contrary, it must be the role of educators to try to bridge, if not eliminate, the digital divide in our educational institutions and our students.

As Prensky (2009) has argued, educators should not have as a pretext the fact that some of their pupils do not have access to a computer or that their schools cannot meet the expense of Internet; they should make their goal to provide as many opportunities to their students as possible to be in contact with online tools and experience their use in an educational setting. He has also suggested that educators must become “digital multipliers” or “people who find creative solutions that bring every student into the digital world” (p. 4) without paying much attention to their backgrounds or income level.

ENDNOTES

¹ The use of the graphic “Our Digital Landscape” in Figure 1 is in keeping with the [Creative Commons](#) Attribution 3.0 US License terms and used here with the author’s expressed permission.

REFERENCES

- Bedenbaugh, L. (2006). Digital storytelling in the classroom. University of Central Florida, The Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Center, FLARE. PowerPoint presentation retrieved June 15, 2008, from <http://tinyurl.com/cxhfdx>
- Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. (2008, March 5). Are all youth digital natives? Retrieved January 22, 2009, from <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/digitalnatives/areallyouthdigitalnatives>
- Blood, R. (2002, September 7). Weblogs: A history and perspective. *Rebecca’s Pocket*. Retrieved October 5, 2008, from http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html
- Bouza, F. (2003). Tendencias a la desigualdad en Internet: La brecha digital (digital divide) en España. In J. F. Tezanos, & A. Tortosa (Eds.), *Tendencias en desvertebración social y en políticas de solidaridad* (pp. 93-121). Madrid: Ed. Sistema. Retrieved October 9, 2008, from <http://www.ucm.es/info/socvi/BOUZA/NUEVA1/Textos/t.pdf>
- Bucy, E. (2000). Social access to the Internet. *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, 5 (1), 50-61.
- Campbell, A. P. (2003, February). Weblogs for use with ESL classes. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 9 (2). Retrieved February 27, 2009, from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-Weblogs.html>
- Campbell, A. P. (2004, September). Using LiveJournal for authentic communication in EFL classes. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 10 (9). Retrieved November 10, 2007, from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-LiveJournal>
- Conejo, M. (2006). Blogs: Usos didácticos. Centro de Profesores y de Recursos de Mérida, Junta de Extremadura, Spain. Retrieved January 22, 2008, from <http://cprmerida.juntaextremadura.net/cpr/documentos/blogs.pdf>
- Dieu, B. (2004). Blogs for language learning. *Essential Teacher, Autumn 1* (4), 26-30.
- Dudeney, G., & Hockly, N. (2007). *How to Teach English with Technology*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Grewling, N. (2004). Collaborative learning online: Using blogs for language teaching. *CLA Language Center Newsletter*, 15 (1). University of Minnesota. Retrieved October 5, 2008, from http://languagecenter.cla.umn.edu/elsiespeaks.php?issue_id=28&article_id=279
- Jukes, I. (2007). Understanding the new digital landscape, kids & the new “Digital Divide”. The Info Savvy Group (pp. 1-12). Retrieved July 17, 2009, from http://web.mac.com/iajukes/thecommittedsardine/Articles_files/ndl.pdf
- Jukes, I., & McCain, T. (2008, May). Closing the digital divide: 7 things education & educators need to do. The Info Savvy Group (pp. 1-31). Retrieved July 18, 2009, from <http://www.committedsardine.com/handouts/ctdd.pdf>
- Lu, M. (2001). Digital divide in developing countries. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, 4 (3), 1-4.

- Parashar Panday, P. (2007). Why blogs? Retrieved April 20, 2008, from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/CSD4902.pdf>
- Pinkman, K. (2005). Using blogs in the foreign language classroom: Encouraging learner independence. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 1 (1), 12-24. Retrieved October 5, 2008, from http://www.jaltcall.org/journal/articles/1_1_Pinkman.pdf
- Prensky, M. (2001a). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 1-6. Retrieved April 15, 2006, from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>
- Prensky, M. (2001b). Digital natives, digital immigrants, Part 2: Do they really think differently? *On the Horizon*, 9 (6), 1-6. Retrieved April 15, 2006, from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part2.pdf>
- Prensky, M. (2005). Listen to the natives. *Educational Leadership*, 63 (4), 8-13. Retrieved April 15, 2006, from http://www.ascd.org/authors/ed_lead/el200512_prensky.html
- Prensky, M. (2009). Let's be "Digital Multipliers": Eliminating the digital divide is something educators can do. *Educational Technology* (in press). Retrieved March 5, 2009, from http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-Lets_Be_Digital_Multipliers-ET-01-09.pdf
- Robinson, J. P., & Nie, N. (Eds.) (2003). The digital divide. *IT & Society*, 1 (4), 1-129. Retrieved September 12, 2007, from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/itandsociety/v01i04.html>
- Swain, H. (2008, May 12). Web 2.0: Boon or bane for universities. Guardian Media Group. Retrieved November 30, 2008, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/may/12/link>
- UNESCO. (1998, October 9). World declaration on higher education for the twenty-first century: Vision and action. Retrieved October 11, 2008, from http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/wche/declaration_eng.htm

Bertha Leiva de Izquierdo is full professor at the Language Department, Universidad Simón Bolívar, Caracas-Venezuela. Leiva received her MA in Education from Boston University. Her research interests include EFL reading comprehension, academic writing and lexical acquisition.

E-mail: bleiva@usb.ve

Leticia Esteves is assistant professor at the Language Department, Universidad Simón Bolívar, Caracas-Venezuela. Esteves received her MA in Applied Linguistics from Universidad Simón Bolívar. Her research interests include curriculum design, materials development, course evaluation, teacher training and teaching methods.

E-mail: lesteves@usb.ve