Blogging Revisited: The Use of Blogs in ESAP Courses

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Abstract. The technological innovations of the last decades and the appearance of the Web 2.0 have triggered various advancements in the field of education in general and language teaching and learning in particular. The weblog or blog is nowadays one of the most popular Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools used for educational purposes, thus research on the use of blogs in education has seen increasing interest. This paper examines blogging as a learning tool in the instruction of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) in tertiary education. It explores the possibilities and pedagogical value offered by using weblogs in language learning, as well as university students' attitudes towards the use of blogs in their language courses.

Keywords: blogs, language learning, language teaching, ESAP, ICT, CMC, BALL, New Technologies.

1 Introduction

Developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have had an impact on every facet of our lives including language education. Since the initiation of Web 2.0 at the beginning of the new millennium, interpersonal interaction through technology has been enhanced transforming all aspects of the teaching and learning process (Dudeney & Hockly, 2012). Terms such as Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) have evolved changing the role of both the language instructor and the language learner in the classroom.

In this era of vast technological advancements the weblog or blog constitutes one of the most widely embraced and easy-to-use 'Internet publishing tools' (Richardson, 2009: 2) as well as one of the most popular pedagogical applications. A blog 'can be thought of as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so' (Campell, 2003). It is a type of website the entries of which appear in reverse chronological order, a 'web diary' as Wu (2006: 69) characterizes it. Amongst the main features of blogs are that they are easy to use, they are interactive, since they allow readers to send comments, and they can combine text, podcasts, pictures, music, videos and many other types of visual design.

The ways in which blogs can be incorporated in the language teaching and learning process are various. Throughout the years blogging has been used either as an occasional activity supplementing the teaching and learning process or as a tool with a principal role

in the educational experience. Campbell (2003) has suggested three types of blogs that have been widely adopted by language educators: the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog. According to Campbell, the tutor blog, a blog created and run by the tutor, can serve as a means for the tutor to send entries to the learners providing them with the opportunity for daily reading practice. Through the tutor blog, the learner is encouraged to explore other English websites and therefore their confidence in using English websites is increased. Furthermore, the tutor blog provides the opportunity for online verbal communication to be encouraged since blogs allow readers to send comments, and it can also serve as a means for the tutor to provide learners with useful information about the course or the syllabus. Finally, it can be a resource of links for self-study. The learner blog, on the other hand, is the blog which is created and run by either one learner or a collaborative group of learners. Campbell claims that this type of blog encourages the use of search engines and internet surfing in English. Such blogs can be used as journals for writing practice and personal expression and they help the learners to develop a 'sense of ownership'. In addition, the fact that the blog can be read by anyone provides learners with the opportunity for authentic communication in the target language. Lastly, the third type of blog, the class blog, refers to the blogs which are created and run collaboratively by a whole class. In this case, blogs can serve as a 'free-form bulletin board' for learners to communicate and post their thoughts. They can also prove useful in cases where learners want to develop online resources for other people. Additionally, class blogs could be used for language exchange between learners from different countries who have publishing rights to the blog.

The widespread use of blogs in language education has inaugurated the development of an innovative research field, the area of Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL), as Ward (2004) names it. Several research studies have been conducted on the use of blogs in language teaching and learning which demonstrate how language educators have utilized this tool to facilitate the learning process. The majority of these studies concentrate on the integration of blogging in the development of writing skills (Arslan and Sahin-Kizil, 2010; Fageeh, 2011; Kashani, Mahmud & Kalajahi, 2013; Lou et al., 2010; Sayed, 2010; Sun, 2010). Apart from improving writing skills however, the weblog also appears to be supportive for oral practice as well. Sun (2009), investigated the use of voice blogs for extensive study of learners' speaking skills and found that the nature of blogs allowed learners to express themselves freely in the target language promoting thus the development of fluency.

Various other studies have demonstrated that blogging can be very beneficial for language learning in general (Arena & Jefferson, 2008; Bartlett-Bragg, 2004; Baturay & Daloglu, 2010; Galien & Bowcher, 2010; Kavaliauskiene, 2007; Liou, 2011; Miceli, Murray & Kennedy, 2010; Richardson, 2009; Seitzinger, 2006). According to these studies, blogging in English language learning is a very enjoyable activity that raises language awareness, enhances learners' motivation, and promotes collaborative and autonomous learning. Most importantly, due to the journal nature of blogs, learners are engaged in contextualized and meaningful use of language and furthermore they are exposed to situations of authentic language use. Moreover, running a blog provides learners with the opportunity for reflection on their performance. Arena (2008, p.3) claims that blogging also promotes higher order thinking skills since in order to

establish a conversation and to construct knowledge collectively, learners and instructors will have to 'go beyond superficialities, posting entries that increase reflection, analysis, discussion and synthesis'. Furthermore, blogging allows interaction with an international audience and thus the classroom expands breaking the physical constraints of a limited room. The use of blogs also develops a strong sense of community among the learners (Miceli, Murray & Kennedy, 2010). Seitzinger (2006) as well as Richardson (2009) additionally state that blogs enhance constructivist learning according to which learning should be active and manipulative, constructive and reflective, intentional, authentic and cooperative. Previous research also shows that blogging is an excellent way to develop listening or reading skills and it is also a tool that allows for each learner to keep an individual record of their work, to create an e-portfolio in other words. Finally, it is generally accepted that running a blog provides the learner with the opportunity to cater for their own learning style following their own learning pace.

The disadvantages reported in the literature mostly concentrate on practical and technical aspects such as difficulties in creating a blog account especially in cases where students do not possess sufficient technological literacy. Forgotten usernames and passwords and failure to keep the blog updated are some other weaknesses of blogs spotted by research conducted in the field (Kavaliauskiene, 2007). Nevertheless, whatever the shortcomings, apparently they are incapable of surmounting the benefits deriving from the use of blogs in the language teaching and learning process.

2   Research Objectives

The purpose of the study was to explore the possibilities and the pedagogical value offered by using weblogs in language learning, as well as to examine university students' attitudes towards the use of blogs in their English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) courses. The study was a research initiative aiming at improving ESAP language course instruction through the use of a Web 2.0 tool that would help develop students' language skills, and increase interaction, collaboration and learner autonomy through asynchronous communication and exposure to various task-based activities.

3   Context

The research was carried out at the Language Centre of the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT) and it involved undergraduate students attending English for Specific Academic Purposes courses during their first academic year of study. The CUT is a newly founded university aspiring to become a pioneering, high-tech institution. The Language Centre of the CUT offers to its students the opportunity to learn foreign languages in a very friendly environment and with the use of the latest theories, methods and materials that are used in the teaching and learning of languages, including New Technologies. Language classes take place in the university's classrooms, most of which are equipped with computers and other technologies allowing access to the Internet at all times. ESAP courses are mandatory for all first-year students.

The blogs constructed for the ESAP courses were class blogs run by the researchers who were also the language instructors. All of the learners were invited to the class blog and they were encouraged to contribute to it. The class blogs were created using the Blogger.com platform and they were mainly used for writing practice even though they were employed for the completion of listening and reading tasks as well. They also served as a useful tool for the organization of the course and for posting material, announcements and useful links. Furthermore, the class blogs provided space on the Web for learners to upload their assignments and to communicate with their peers and the instructor offering and receiving feedback on the posted work. The class blog finally provided opportunities for reflection and introspection.

4   Participants

A total of one hundred and three (103) undergraduate students from four different university departments of the Cyprus University of Technology participated in the study. Twenty-eight students majored in Hotel and Tourism Management, sixteen students studied Agricultural Sciences, Biotechnology and Food Science, thirty-one students studied Commerce, Finance and Shipping, and twenty-eight students studied in the Mechanical Engineering, Materials Science and Engineering Department. The vast majority of students (93.2%) were of Cypriot origin. Gender was equally represented in the sample with 47.6% male and 52.4% female students. Most students (78.6%) were novices in the use of blogs and only 21.4% of them had experienced blogging before using the particular blog for their English course. However, participants exhibited experience with and exposure to other technologies, such as Facebook, Skype, Oovoo, Google+, and YouTube, amongst others. Most students indicated that they spent approximately five to twenty hours per week on the Internet.

5   Measure

For the purposes of the study a questionnaire was designed by the researchers in order to explore the affordances and the pedagogical value offered by using weblogs in language learning, as well as to measure the university students' attitudes towards the use of blogs in their ESAP courses. The questionnaires were administered at the end of the semester and requested the voluntary participation of students in order to yield useful information regarding blogging in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. The questionnaires were anonymous and included mostly Likert-type questions pertaining to the usage of blogs, benefits and challenges of the particular Web 2.0 tool, as well as motivating and demotivating factors in using blogging for learning purposes. Some open-ended questions that allowed for reflection and further expression on the students' part were also included in the questionnaire. After receiving the completed questionnaires, data were entered in SPSS for statistical analysis. Quantitative data analyses were performed using frequencies and t-test analysis for differences between groups.

6   Results

Results that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires indicated that, overall, students seemed to have a positive attitude towards blogging in a language class and considered the blog to be a user-friendly tool that could be easily navigated. The vast majority of the students indicated that they found the class blog easy to use (79.3%), and that they felt comfortable participating in the activities undertaken on the blog (91%). It is important to note that the language instructors provided students with instructions on how to use the class blogs at the beginning of the semester, and continued providing guidance throughout the whole semester. Most students (93%) indicated that they found their teachers' instructors easy to follow and considered their guidance very helpful.

6.1   Use of Blogs

Most students (85.4%) indicated that they spent approximately two hours per week on their language class blog, and fewer students (13.6%) used the blogs for around three to five hours per week. As an asynchronous tool, the blog allowed students to visit it both from class but also from home. Students mostly engaged in the blog activities during the class with the instructors facilitating the whole process. However, they were given the opportunity to revisit the content after class time in order to reflect on it, revise it, or look at the comments made either by peers or the teacher. A big percentage of the participants (71.6%) appeared to have enjoyed using the blog as part of their language class, and considered it to be a useful part of the course (86.1%). Furthermore, the vast majority of the sample indicated that they would like to use the blog again in the future as a learning tool both for a language class (73.8%) and for other university courses (79.6%).

The class blogs were incorporated in the specific language courses from the first weeks of the semester and activities to be undertaken on them were assigned throughout the whole semester. Students' participation in the blogs was constantly evaluated, reviewed and assessed, and part of the students' overall final grade in the course depended on their contribution to the class blog. Therefore, students realized that the blog constituted an integral part of the course early on and valued it as a learning and assessment tool that would have a determining role in their learning, but also in their achievement grade. This finding emerges from the way the students carried out the various blog activities. Based on their responses on the questionnaire, students appear to have engaged in certain practices typical of the ones they engage in when employing more traditional ways of learning, such as writing a draft, using the dictionary, checking the spelling, and searching the internet. Specifically, 21.6% of the respondents indicated that they wrote a draft of their blog post before they submitted it, and a higher percentage (48%) used the dictionary while they were writing their blog post. Moreover, 44.0% of the students indicated that they used the spell check before they submitted their blog post, and 68.0% of the sample searched the internet for information in order to complete a task on the blog. Such practices demonstrate that students

valued their work on the blog, and they considered their contribution to it important and determining for their learning and assessment.

6.2   Attitudes Towards the Class Blogs

The study yielded interesting results with regard to the students' attitudes to the use of blogs for language learning purposes. Most of the respondents appear to have had a positive reaction to the class blog and felt that the activities that were carried out on the blog helped them develop their skills in English (78.3%). The blogs also seem to have developed the students' confidence in undertaking writing tasks as 87.3% of the respondents indicated that blogging increased their determination and desire to express their thoughts in writing. Additionally, a big part of the sample (71.8%) felt that their interaction with the teachers and peers increased through the various blog tasks, and 69.6% of the students indicated that contributing to the class blog made them feel as part of a network or a community.

6.3   Motivation and Blogging

Another interesting finding that emerged from the study was the positive impact of the language class blogs on the students' engagement with and motivation for the course. A big percentage of the participants (61.7%) indicated that they were more motivated to work on assignments on the blog compared to other writing assignments that were carried out in more traditional ways. Similarly, a large number of the respondents (62.7%) said that they looked forward to a new task on the blog during the semester. The study looked into the aspect of motivation more closely to identify the factors that motivated students to use the blogs in class. The figure below ranks the various factors that motivated students to use the class blog as they were identified by the respondents.
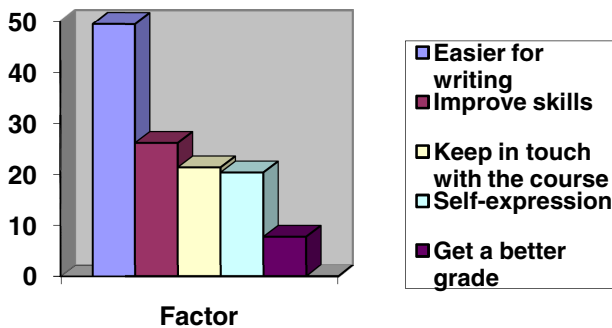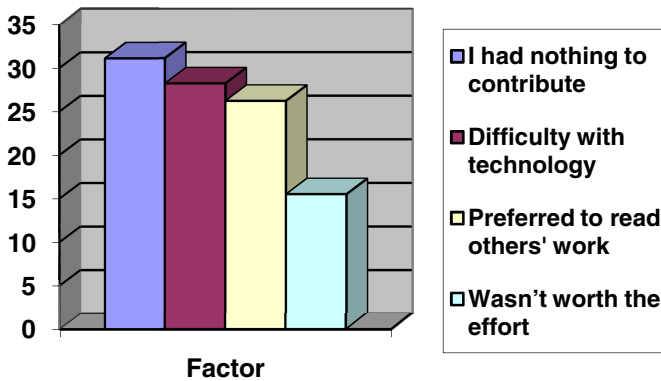

Fig. 1. Factors that motivated the students to use the class blog

Fig. 2. Factors that demotivated the students to use the class blog

Since not all respondents maintained high levels of participation in the blog, the study also explored the factors that discouraged students from taking part in the blogging experience. Figure 2 presents the demotivating factors in contributing to the blog as these were ranked by the respondents.

6.4   Concerns in Using the Blogs and Gender Differences

Apart from the factors that demotivated the students to use their language class blog, the study identified certain concerns as these were put forward by the respondents. These concerns are related to some students' inhibitions in writing things that were accessible by their peers. In addition, using the blog in class seems to have overwhelmed certain students as they indicated that they felt pressure when they used the blog because it was a new experience for them on the one hand, and because it increased their workload, on the other.

Further exploration of these concerns yielded interesting results pertaining to gender differences when it comes to issues of privacy on the net and exposure to new classroom experiences. The t-test analysis that was computed to identify mean differences between male and female students indicated that female students felt more embarrassed because other students were able to read their blog posts, compared to the male students. Additionally, female students felt greater pressure when using the blog as a new learning tool as opposed to their male peers, and they also felt that their workload increased because of the blog to a greater extent than male fellow students.

Table 1. Gender differences regarding students' concerns about the class blog

Concerns/University	n	M	SD	P
Embarrassment because blogs were accessible by peers				
Male	48	1.85	,825	.018
Female	51	2.20	,800	
Pressure because of the new experience				
Male	48	2.00	,851	.023
Female	54	2.33	,727	
Increase in workload because of the blog				
Male	48	2.21	,743	.060
Female	54	2,56	,718	

Notes: Questionnaire scale responses were as follows: 1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: agree; 4: strongly agree.

The P value is below .05 level of significance.

6.5   Benefits of the Class Blogs

The study explored students' attitudes towards blogging in specific learning areas and practices. Overall, students considered the class blogs to be very beneficial in multiple ways. Table 2 indicates the areas and practices benefitted by the blogs as these were identified by the sample. The table shows that a big part of the sample feels that blogs were beneficial in a number of learning areas and practices. However, the study yielded interesting results with regard to differences in attitudes towards the benefits of blogs between experienced bloggers and novice users. The analysis of the students' responses indicated that the students who had tried blogging prior to their participation in the specific blog appear to feel more benefitted from their language blog

Table 2. Areas and practices benefitted by the blogs as identified by the students

Reasons	Percent
Receiving constructive feedback from the teacher	77.4
Communicating with the teacher	77.2
Completing writing assignments	76.5
Archiving my work and using the blog as a portfolio	73.5
Increasing my motivation for class activities	73.5
Reading important announcements	73.2
Working together with my fellow students	72.7
Expressing my thoughts and ideas	72.0
Being creative with my assignments	71.7
Sharing ideas with my fellow students	69.6
Keeping up-to-date with the course material	69.6
Working by myself outside the class	53.9

compared to the students who had never blogged before. Specifically, beginners in the blogosphere felt benefitted by the blogs to a lesser extent in the areas of learner autonomy and collaboration with peers. Finally, further examination of differences among groups indicated that attitudes towards the benefits of blogs in the areas of learner autonomy, collaboration with peers, as well as in the area of creativity seem to be informed by students' overall achievement and performance in the course.

7   Discussion

This study yielded interesting findings that are in line with other research findings pertaining to the possibilities and the pedagogical value offered by using blogs in language learning, as well as with regard to the students' attitudes towards the use of blogs in their university ESAP courses. The results that emerged from the questionnaires indicated that, overall, students appear to have had a positive reaction towards blogging as part of their language course, and considered this tool to be beneficial in multiple ways.

The use of blogs in the specific ESAP courses was well received by the vast majority of the participants who found this tool very user friendly and felt happy carrying out activities in this learning environment. Students were allowed access and sharing of information from any location and this gave them the opportunity to interact and collaborate through asynchronous communication outside the class and beyond the strict class hours.

The blog was considered as an integral part of the course and it was recognized as an additional learning tool that would facilitate language learning and that would determine students' overall assessment in the course. For this reason, most participants were found to have engaged in typical practices that are usually employed in traditional modes of learning, such as writing a draft, using the dictionary, checking spelling, and searching the internet whenever a task was assigned on the blog. Students felt that the blog provided them with a supplementary educational context where learning occurred either individually or collaboratively with constant facilitation on behalf of the instructor.

Students' attitudes towards their blogging experience were explored through the questionnaires. The vast majority of the respondents appears to have had positive attitudes towards the class blog and seems to have recognized that this tool produced unique educational affordances for them. Specifically, students indicated that with their active participation in the blog, their skills in English were developed, focusing on their improvement in expressing themselves in writing. Students also highlighted the increase of interaction between themselves and their instructor and among their fellow students through the assigned blog tasks. Interestingly, they indicated that being part of the class blog, they set up a community where collaboration and interaction were promoted.

Another important finding that emerged from the study related to students' motivation which seems to have been at high levels when undertaking activities on the class blog. Students exhibited willingness and interest, and sometimes even excitement about the various blog tasks. Further exploration in what motivated students to actively participate in the blogs indicated that the most motivating factor was that writing on the blog was considered to be easier than writing on paper, followed by the students' view that through the blog they felt their skills in English were improved. At the same time, an examination of the factors that discouraged students from actively contributing to the blog indicated that students would have liked to participate more, but they weren't sure they would have anything valuable to contribute. Also, some students were interested in participating, but they had difficulty coming to terms with the new technology.

The study also yielded interesting results with regards to gender differences in students' attitudes towards blogging in class. Specifically, female students appear to have felt more embarrassed than their male peers when they published their posts on the blog as everybody could read them and criticize their performance. In addition, female students appear to have been overwhelmed with the new technology that was added to the course to a greater extent than male students and indicated that they felt pressure and that their workload had increased. This finding is in line with other research findings that show female students to be more concerned with issues of privacy

when writing on the net, as well as with regard to confidence in using ICT and handling new experiences with technology tools.

Other differences that emerged from the research centre on students' perceived attitudes towards the benefits of blogs in certain areas and practices in language learning. Specifically, beginners in the blogosphere felt benefitted by the blogs to a lesser extent in the areas of learner autonomy and collaboration with peers, compared to more experienced users. Finally, attitudes towards the benefits of blogs in the areas of learner autonomy, collaboration with peers, as well as creativity were also affected by the students' overall achievement and performance in the course. High achieving students appeared to feel much benefitted by blogs when working by themselves outside the class and when working together with their fellow students in collaborative assignments. They also seemed to value the class blogs in the area of creativity in the assigned tasks. Medium achieving students and low achieving ones appeared to feel benefitted in these specific areas and practices as well but to a lesser extent.

However, an overall examination of the students' perceived benefits of blogs in their ESAP courses indicated that various areas may be afforded by this Web 2.0 tool. As identified by the respondents, blogs can be very beneficial for receiving constructive feedback from and communicating with the language instructor. Moreover, students focused on the benefits of blogs in helping them develop their writing competencies, as well as in being creative with their assignments, and in enhancing learner autonomy and collaboration with peers. Finally, respondents viewed the class blog as a useful course management tool that allowed them to archive their work and stay in touch with the course material.

8   Conclusion

Technology seems to have become an integral part of teaching and learning in the recent years. Some students are willing to engage and participate in new ways of learning, while others are more reluctant to move from the traditional learning mode to which they are accustomed. Participants in this study appear to have developed positive attitudes towards the language class blogs and viewed this tool as an educational space where they learned, they interacted, they collaborated, and they belonged together. More in-depth research could point to a further understanding of the pedagogical value of blogs in language learning. All in all, the insights gained from the research help take the discussion of using Web 2.0 for learning purposes forward and could assist language instructors in developing a better strategy for incorporating this type of tool in language courses.

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