

Blogging in Teaching English in Georgia

Moralishvili Sophio – Associate Professor, Department of Pedagogics, Akaki Tsereteli State University, Kutaisi, Georgia

Abstract

Introduction and aim: The aim of the article is to take a look at blogging while teaching English as a second language in Georgia. Blogging is becoming increasingly popular as a language learning tool throughout the world recently. A blog is a website which is frequently updated and can be compared to an online journal. It's rather easy to set up and update and requires only basic access to the Internet, and a minimum knowledge of technology. It enables students to engage in online exchanges and in this way expand their language study and learning community beyond the physical classroom. Blogs can also display photos, audio and even video, but this article will concentrate on showing how a simple text-based blog can be used as an innovative approach to get a great effect with your English language learners. The article gives an overview of blogging websites, suggests why you might want to use them, and gives some practical advice on setting up blogs for use with your own classes. The article also presents findings from the survey about utilizing blogs by Georgian English Language Teachers.

Research Methodology: We use descriptive and explanatory research methods for the better understanding of this innovative approach and for showing the ways of implementation of blogging activities within English language teaching and learning. Quantitative method was also used to reveal if teachers use blogs in their classes and if they are willing to utilize them in future.

Results and implications: The study revealed that there are many reasons why teachers may choose to use blogs with students. The best reasons are: to provide a real audience for student writing; to provide extra reading practice for students; to guide students to online resources appropriate for their level; to increase the sense of community in a class; to encourage shy students to participate and stimulate out-of-class discussion. Though a certain number of Georgian teachers heard about using blogs in English language teaching, they still refrain from using them in their own classes.

Conclusion: Using blogs has many benefits both for teachers and students. This innovative method can be an effective means of facilitating greater learner interaction and reflection on skills development. Though Georgian teachers have a positive attitude toward blogging, they lack the quantitative data to provide empirical support for blogging activities as being either more or less effective than traditional paper-based exercises.

Keywords: Blogging, innovative approach, learner autonomy, online resources, out-of-class discussion

The traditional classroom led by teacher has become pedagogically limited in making language learning student-centered and restricts learners' capacity to learn autonomously. According to Little (2003), autonomy entails decision-making, critical reflection and social interaction. Autonomous learners are responsible for their own learning and are actively involved in the learning process by setting personal goals, planning and executing tasks, and reviewing their progress. Teachers play a supportive and facilitative role in the autonomous learning by encouraging students to take an active part in decision-making and problem solving, and offering them guidance. From a social constructivist view, the development of autonomy is a result of interplay between social and reflective processes (Little, 2003). Benson (2003) notes that during social interaction, students work collaboratively with others through which they develop high order thinking skills by observing, analyzing and evaluating information.

Student-centered learning implies significantly changed roles for students and teachers. In student-centered learning environments, students are more engaged, responsible learners. They work to develop and explore their own unique academic and career interests, and produce authentic, professional quality work to demonstrate their learning. To support students in their new roles, teachers act as coaches, advisors, and facilitators of student learning. Instead of lecturing to a whole class as the primary mode of instruction, teachers provide opportunities for students to take charge of their own learning (Clarke, 2003; Hargreaves, 2005; Keefe & Jenkins, 2008).

The solution seems to be the integration of innovative technologies in learning. There are several reasons cited in the literature as to why technology should be an integral part of student-centered and autonomous learning. First, even though the relationship between technology and learning is complex, research indicates that specific uses of technology can improve student outcomes. Second, the use of technology in education is essential in helping students build 21st century skills. Third, students are highly motivated to use technology. Technology and media use is pervasive among children and youth. Thus, technology is a powerful tool for teachers to support teaching and learning.

While there are many ways to support autonomous learning, computer-assisted language learning is increasingly recognized as a powerful means for developing learner autonomy (Benson, 2004, Lee, 2005; Murphy, 2006). The advent of Web 2.0 technologies (wikis, blogs, podcastings) brings new dimensions to online learning.

The aim of the article is to take a look at blogging while teaching English as a second language in Georgia. Blogging is becoming increasingly popular as a language learning tool throughout the world recently. A blog is a website which is frequently updated and a kind of an online journal. It's rather easy to set up and update and requires only basic access to the

Internet, and a minimum knowledge of technology. It enables students to engage in online exchanges and in this way expand their language study and learning community beyond the physical classroom. Blogs can also display photos, audio and even video, but this article will concentrate on the basics, showing how a simple text-based blog can be used as an innovative approach to get a great effect with your English language learners. The article gives an overview of blogging websites, suggests why you might want to use them, and gives some practical advice on setting up blogs for use with your own classes. The article also presents findings from the survey about utilizing blogs by Georgian Teachers and students.

We use descriptive and explanatory research methods for the better understanding of this innovative approach and for showing the ways of implementation of blogging activities within English language teaching and learning. Quantitative method was also used to reveal if teachers use blogs in their classes and if they are willing to utilize them in future.

A blog is a form of website whose main characteristic is that the most recent content published as 'blog posts' appear at the top of the front page of the site. This content is often organised through the use of tags or categories which are often displayed as tag or category clouds. Blog content may have varying degrees of interactivity determined by the blog author(s), for instance through enabling the use of comments or 'follow' and 'like' buttons on the blog. Blogs' authors also commonly make use of a whole array of widgets usually found in the sidebars of blogs. These add desired extra functionality, for instance, images, maps, menus, chat tools etc. The possibilities are endless, which in itself presents a range of issues and challenges.

Blogs are used in various ways depending on their pedagogical purposes. Personal blogs are collections of online journals that foster self-expression and self-reflection (e.g., Lee, 2010; Yang, 2009), whereas collective blogs involving an entire class or small groups promote interactive and collaborative learning. Blogging fosters learner autonomy, as students take charge of making their own decisions as to what, how much and when to publish their work (Lee, 2010). Accordingly, students develop the awareness of their ability to plan, understand and regulate their own learning.

Aaron Campbell (2003) has outlined three types of blogs for use with language classes:

The Tutor Blog - is run by the teacher of a class. The content of this type of blog can be limited to syllabus, course information, homework, assignments, etc. Or the teacher may choose to write about his or her life, sharing reflections about the local culture, target culture and language to stimulate online and in-class discussion. In this type of blog, students are normally restricted to being able to write comments to the teacher's posts.

The Class Blog - is a shared space, with teacher and students being able to write to the main area. It is best used as a collaborative discussion space, an extra-curricular extension of the classroom. Students can be encouraged to reflect in more depth, in writing, on themes touched upon in class. Students are given a greater sense of freedom and involvement than with the tutor blog.

The Learner Blog - is the third type of blog and it requires more time and effort from the teacher to both set up and moderate, but is probably the most rewarding. It involves giving each student an individual blog. The benefit of this is that this becomes the student's own personal online space. Students can be encouraged to write frequently about what interests them, and can post comments on other students' blogs.

Of course, teachers who decide to use blogs often use a combination of Tutor or Class blog and Learner blogs, with hyperlinks connecting them. So, why should you blog with your students? There are many reasons why you may choose to use weblogs with students. One of the best reasons is to provide a real audience for student writing. Usually, the teacher is the only person who reads student writing, and the focus of this reading is usually on form, not content. With weblogs, students can find themselves writing for a real audience that, apart from the teacher, may include their peers, students from other classes, or even other countries, their parents, and potentially anyone with access to the Internet.

Here are some other reasons for using blogs: the first is to provide extra reading practice for students. This reading can be produced by the teacher, other students in the same class, or, in the case of comments posted to a blog, by people from all over the world. Second, blogs can be used as online student learner journals that can be read by their peers. The value of using learner journals has been well documented. Usually they are private channels between teacher and student. Using a blog as a learner journal can increase the audience. Third, you can guide students to online resources appropriate for their level. The Internet has a bewildering array of resources that are potentially useful for your students. The problem is finding and directing your learners to them. For this reason, you can use your tutor blog as a portal for your learners. Fourth, through blogs you can increase the sense of community in a class. A class blog can help foster a feeling of community between the members of a class, especially if learners are sharing information about themselves and their interests, and are responding to what other students are writing. The next very important reason is to encourage shy students to participate. There is evidence to suggest that students who are quiet in class can find their voice when given the opportunity to express themselves in a blog. Blogs give a wonderful possibility to stimulate out-of-class discussion. A blog can be an ideal space for pre-class or post-class discussion. And what students write about in the blog can also be used to promote discussion in class. Blogs can encourage a process-writing approach. Because students are writing for publication, they are usually more concerned about getting things right, and usually understand the value of

rewriting more than if the only audience for their written work is the teacher. And finally, a blog is another tool that can help bring students together and build a closer relationship between them.

There are lots of sites where you can set up a blog for free, but perhaps the best known and one of the most reliable and simple blogging tools to use with students is Blogger (<http://blogger.com>). It takes only fifteen minutes from setting up an account to publishing the first post using this valuable tool. The teacher sets up the tutor blog or a class blog. With a Class blog, students will need to be invited to participate by e-mail. Learner blog accounts can either be set up beforehand by the teacher, or done at the same time with a whole class in a computer room. The former gives the teacher more control of student accounts, but some advantages of the latter is that learners are given more choice (of username, design of the blog, etc.) and a greater sense of 'ownership' of their new virtual writing space.

I have conducted the survey to reveal if teachers use blogs in their classes while teaching English and if they are willing to utilize them in future. I have composed a small questionnaire with the following three simple questions:

1. Do you use blogging as an activity in your ELT and if "Yes" how often?
2. Do you know about advantages of using blogs in ELT?
3. What are the reasons preventing you from using blogs in ELT?

Altogether 30 English language teachers from different state and private universities in Georgia participated in the survey. Only 25 teachers said that they have experience of using blogs in while teaching English, but they don't do it regularly. They only used blogs when it was suggested by the course book and when they were given special guidance by the teacher's book. Majority of the teachers heard about teaching blogs, know about the advantages, but still never tried using them even with the advanced students. They cited many reasons preventing them from using blogs: teachers are not sure about the efficiency of using blogs; they lack the knowledge of using technology in class and need more training and workshops to learn how to integrate them in teaching; in many cases, universities do not provide necessary equipment and not every student has the access to the internet and etc.

The study revealed many reasons why teachers may choose to use blogs with students. The best reasons are: to provide a real audience for student writing; to provide extra reading practice for students; to guide students to online resources appropriate for their level; to increase the sense of community in a class; to encourage shy students to participate and stimulate out-of-class discussion. Though a certain number of Georgian teachers heard about using blogs in English language teaching, they still refrain from using them in their own classes.

We may conclude that using blogs has many benefits both for teachers and students. This innovative method can be an effective means of facilitating greater learner interaction and reflection on skills development. Though Georgian teachers have a positive attitude toward blogging, they lack the quantitative data to provide empirical support for blogging activities as being either more or less effective than traditional paper-based exercises.

References:

1. Benson, P., Learner autonomy in the classroom. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Practical English language teaching*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2003.
2. Clarke, J., *Changing Systems to Personalize Learning*. Introduction to the Personalization Workshops. Providence, RI: Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory of the Education Alliance at Brown University, 2003.
3. Keefe, J. W. & Jenkins, J. M., *Personalized Instruction: The Key to Student Achievement*. Pennsylvania: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2008.
4. Little, D., Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning. Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, *Guide to Good Practice*, 2003. Retrieved from <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1409>
5. Lee, L., Fostering reflective writing and interactive exchange through blogging in an advanced language course. *ReCALL*, 22(2), 2010.
6. Murphy, L., Supporting learner autonomy in a distance learning context. In D. Gardner (Ed.), *Learner autonomy 10: Integration and support*. Dublin: Authentik, 2006.
7. Yang, S.-H., Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice. *Educational Technology & Society*, 12(2), 2009.
8. *Innovations in English language teaching for migrants and refugees* Edited by David Mallows, British Council 2012, www.britishcouncil.org
9. <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-Weblogs.html>