

Last name:

First name:

E-Mail:

School:

Lesson Title:

Brief description:

Topic:

Subtopic (optional):

Grammar topics:

Keywords:

Language:

Textbook (optional):

Skills targeted: Reading Writing Speaking Listening Culture

Model: PACE Interactive reading/listening Culture

Class level: Elementary Middle School HS I-II HS III HS IV-V College Elem. College Intern.

Standards: 1.1 Interpersonal Communication 1.2 Interpreive Communication
 1.3 Presentational Communication
 2.1 Practices of Culture 2.2 Products of Culture
 3.1 Furthering Connections 3.2 Acquiring Information
 4.1 Language Comparisons 4.2 Culture Comparisons
 5.1 School & Community 5.2 Life-Long Learning

Date: 8/9/2005 2:08:17 PM
EITHER include the Lesson URL for the working web page version of your lesson plan **OR** provide the lesson plan by filling in the following fields. Or use both if appropriate.

Lesson URL:

Objectives:

Materials:

Procedures:

Cultural information:

Technology:

3

Uses of Blogs in L2 Instruction

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Abstract

Blogs are one of the newest tools in L2 instruction. This article offers a brief overview of the literature on blogs in L2 teaching and an outline of how they can be used in class to encourage language production and cultural awareness in learners. Also detailed are conceptual and practical concerns related to these activities. Finally, an overview is presented of what students think of using blogs, and a few topics are proposed for further research.

Background

The expression of ideas using the typewriter, computer, and networks of computers has often been compared to writing. Differences between writing on paper and using computers to "write" are numerous. Therefore, as technological expression continues to become more mainstream, the question arises: Are these new technological media, particularly blogs, useful in teaching the more traditional skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as addressing cultural topics?

A review of the literature indicates that the use of blogs in second language (L2) instruction is relatively novel, with some of the earliest articles on the topic published online in 2003. This review indicates that blogs are a dynamic vehicle that L2 professionals can apply to the teaching of L2 skills. Ward (2004) mentions this application to writing instruction for ESL students and provides a definition and history of blogs, stating that blogs look more like Web sites than e-mail, although they have qualities of both. He defines blogs as "a free online publishing house for anyone who cares to write and for those who care to read it" (p. 2). In citing Stiler, he further differentiates blogs from journals, in that the former are more like reporting, and the latter are like diaries. Ward then emphasizes the benefits of blogging in composition classes. The readers are authentic, and the language is communicative, as opposed to mechanical, with the emphasis on the process of writing, with peer review or editing. The effect is that of reducing inhibitions regarding the act of writing, or what he denominates "disinhibition." Furthermore,

the technology itself provides “dynamic content, connecting multiple authors,” facilitating “an interactive relationship with an infinite and unknowable audience.” He concludes that bloggers and their readers have “expectations and ‘needs’ that may not have existed in previous modes of communication” (p. 3).

Ward (2004) also argues that blogs aid in the development of reading skills. For his study, blogs were readily available in English for his ESL students. Blogs are also increasingly available in non-English target languages, such as Spanish and French. These may be used as authentic reading material. Ward, however, lists some of the drawbacks of blogging, including the fact that it may lead to superficial reading and sloppy writing. These problems can be avoided with judicious moderating by the instructor of the exchanges in a blog. The possibility remains, too, that blogging may be just the latest flash in the technological pan, an outgrowth of e-mailing and perhaps the sibling of IM-ing (Instant Messaging), another technology—this one synchronous—that could also have application to L2 instruction.

Ward’s article provides a solid background of blogging, but there is a Web site with a virtual catalogue of ideas as to how to apply blogging to many aspects of L2 teaching. Paul Hampel’s (2004) Web site offers many good suggestions for using blogs in education, including creating a reflective-journal-type blog, ideas to start a class blogging, and ideas to encourage students to start their own individual or shared blogs.

Godwin-Jones (2003) points out that the advantages of blogging include maintaining a log of exchanges among students, a more serious consideration of language (as opposed to the language used in e-mails), and the encouragement of community language learning by electronic means. Godwin-Jones indicates that “self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of the students, who may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience” (p. 13).

Eduadget is an online publication whose subtitle is “Plain-Talking Technology Reviews for Teachers.” In one of its 2005 articles, Steve Brooks plants blogs as a platform from which listening to sound files, viewing posted graphics, and speaking to classes in other countries are all possible using Audioblog, Flickr, and Skype, respectively. As further corroboration that the use of blogs has attained mainstream status in L2 education, the authors cite prospectuses of studies of their use in classes and announcements of conferences about the topic.

Setting

Before outlining the uses of blogs in an L2 classroom, the authors wish to describe the particular setting that served as the basis for their study. All activities and courses discussed in this article took place in public university courses. At Southern Polytechnic State University, campus technological resources are many, including multiple high-speed Internet-connected computer labs. The department involved in this study also maintains its own language lab with 28 computers.

In the elementary courses used for this study, students ranged in age from approximately 18 to 50. Many of the students in the Elementary Spanish II course are “non-traditional” and come to the class after non-academic work during the day. During the semester in which these blog activities were implemented, approximately 20 students were enrolled in Elementary Spanish I, 28 in Elementary Spanish II, and 12 in Intermediate Spanish II. Blogs were also used minimally in advanced-level Spanish classes: Techniques of Translation and Advanced Grammar and Composition.

The elementary and intermediate classes met in one of two locations—the main classroom or the language lab. At the front of the main classroom there is a SmartBoard connected to a computer and projector, and the desks are arranged in a large circle. The language lab is arranged with an instructor’s computer at the front and the student computers in carrels. Both the classroom and language lab computers are connected to high-speed Internet.

A voluntary survey completed by 23 students from the elementary courses at the end of the semester revealed that most students rated their “familiarity with computers” very high and their “familiarity with the Internet” even higher. Only two students rated their “familiarity with computers” as “average,” and only one student rated his/her “familiarity with the Internet” as “average.” No students rated themselves below average in these two areas. These results are key to understanding the setting and students with which these blog activities were used, namely underscoring the fact that the majority of them are technologically trained.

Goals and Objectives

The language goals for the elementary courses described here adhere closely to a list of performance outcomes provided by the university system. As such, these courses could be described as objectives-based or competency-based. Further, these outcomes are divided into the four language skills and do not address culture.

A main goal in implementing blogs in the elementary L2 classrooms was to improve student writing. Blogs were seen as an opportunity to decrease inhibition in writing, to encourage self- and peer-editing, and to practice writing strategies. A lesser goal in the Elementary Spanish II and Intermediate Spanish II courses was to increase opportunity for reading of authentic materials through target-language blogs.

Many of these blog activities were designed specifically to meet the outcomes listed under the writing section of the university system outcomes. Some of these include “write short paragraphs about self, family, school” (Elementary Spanish I); “write short notes to classmates about plans for the weekend or descriptions of last weekend” (Elementary Spanish II); and “write expository prose of one to two pages, consisting of a description or an opinion, about very familiar topics” (Intermediate Spanish II). Thus, blog tasks were often guided by these desired outcomes.

Once the use of blogs for teaching writing was established, their uses to teach other skills became evident. There are services that include the capacity to publish sound files, including MP3 and WAV, and podcasts, or the posting of a sound file to a blog that readers will download and listen to on a portable player, much as they would listen to a radio program. One disadvantage is that some services charge a long-distance fee that makes participation of all students too costly. Additional services include storing, searching, sorting, and sharing graphics for their use in class, both "big C culture" graphics, as well as "little c culture" graphics of everyday life in the target culture. An additional advantage to blogs is one's ability to make long distance phone calls over the Internet, thus facilitating the possibility of having a class in the U. S. talk to one in another country.

Activity Types

Over the course of the semester, students were asked to use the blog in four main types of activities. A fifth activity, authentic blog reading, was explored relatively little, due to time limitations.

Assignment prompt

The instructor posts a prompt on the blog and students are expected to respond to it. Prompts were often directly related to the vocabulary presented in the chapter and being considered in class. Responses to the prompt would sometimes be assigned as homework. Some examples of prompts follow:

- "¿Cómo eres? ¿Qué te gusta hacer?" (*What are you like? What do you like to do?*)
- "¿Cómo es tu familia?" (*What is your family like?*)
- "¿Qué haces todos los días?" (*What do you do every day?*)
- "Haz un plan para tu bien estar." (*Make a personal health plan.*)

Although superficially quite similar to traditional paper journal prompts, blog prompts allowed for a sense of community to develop. Students knew that a real audience, their peers, would see their replies. Further, as the blog was on the Internet, students also knew that their audience was not only limited to their classmates, but perhaps expanded to the larger Internet community.

The two instructors used this activity in several ways, one as a required homework activity in which the blog writing was viewed as product itself, and the other as a means for the students as a class to analyze their errors. Thus, the first instructor required that students include their names on the assignment, whereas the second encouraged the use of aliases. Future research could be done comparing the alias method to the more traditional one in order to determine the efficacy of one method over the other.

The instructor using the alias method relied on intrinsic motivation and frequent reminders in class of the benefits of this writing to motivate the students to

write. At times the class as a whole would use part of a class period to respond to a blog assignment prompt. As responses to a prompt were perused, the instructor looked for recurring errors, though he never corrected them immediately. At the beginning of the course, the instructor specifically alerted students that their blog posts would not be corrected for accuracy unless they specifically put "PLEASE REVISE" in the subject line. Instead, during the next class, using these posts as the basis for discussion, the instructor taught or retaught certain vocabulary or grammar points. Besides language content, the instructor often focused on revision strategies that could be used to identify and improve on these types of errors; for example, finding and underlining all adjectives and then checking their agreement with the nouns they describe. As the students were encouraged to use aliases in order to ensure anonymity, there was little anxiety that the instructor was criticizing an individual's language use.

The blog assignments at the advanced level were obligatory. Students of Advanced Grammar and Composition were asked to complete the following creative writing exercise:

Ahora les propongo una historia de no más de 100 palabras. La idea, la historia, el formato, se los dejo en sus manos, sólo una condición: yo le proporciono el final. Su cuento debe terminar con la siguiente frase: "A las cinco de la tarde, se callaron todos los relojes." ¡Ojo! Esta frase no puede estar ni al principio ni en el medio, recuerden, sólo al final.

(Now I propose that you write a story of not more than 100 words. The idea, the history, the format, I leave in your hands, with one exception: I determine the ending. Your story should end with the sentence: "At five in the afternoon, all the clocks stopped." Careful! This sentence can be neither at the beginning nor in the middle, but remember, only at the end.)

On the other hand, the class in Techniques of Translation had a more mundane assignment:

Favor de definir las siguientes siglas en el contexto de la traductología. Luego, haz un comentario sobre cada una:

(Please define the following abbreviations in the context of translation science. Then, provide a commentary on each:)

1. TM
2. EMBT
3. CAT

In the case of each assignment, the students were later asked to post comments on their opinions of their classmates' submissions, including form and content. The result of this use of the blog was that of creating a greater sense of community, of sharing ideas, and of group learning than would have otherwise been possible without the blog.

For the Business Spanish course, an extra-credit section was set up so that students who attended outside activities, such as business conferences, could share their observations about them by posting comments on the blog.

Free Write

Each week in the elementary courses, students were asked to post something on the blog. The assignment was purposely generic and open-ended in an attempt to lower the students' inhibitions to write. As blogs are often used in the "blogosphere," or blogging community, to discuss random personal day-to-day topics, students were encouraged to use the class blog in a similar way in Spanish. While the topic of the assignment prompt was often limited to the content being discussed in class, the content of the free write activity was much more open. To discourage inappropriate content in the free write, students were reminded as to what would be inappropriate to post on the blog, such as links to pornographic material, copyrighted material, inflammatory comments, or abusive language. As students used aliases on the blog in the elementary level courses, these free-write posts could not be used for grading, since the instructor could not and did not necessarily want to identify the students.

Describe a Scene

Although the previous two activities were done mainly outside of class, the "Describe a scene" was done during class time in two computer labs (the language lab and another). Used to teach writing, reading, and culture, this activity was created in an attempt to mimic a typical, authentic communication exchange over the Internet. Although these students would perhaps rarely write a physical letter to someone describing their "plans for the weekend or descriptions of last weekend," a desired outcome mentioned earlier, they would use the Internet for such exchanges much more often.

On the days when the class would "describe a scene," all students would meet in the language lab. First, the activity was explained to the class as a whole. After receiving this explanation, the class was divided into two rooms with computers and access to the blog. The activity would start with a print of a painting displayed on the main projector at the front of the room. Each student's job in Room 1 was to write a post describing the scene in the picture. Each student's job in Room 2 was to read all of the posts from the other room and recreate the scene to his/her best ability. Then, after all individuals had completed a rough sketch of what the scene looked like, they would all compare their drawings and discuss in L2 how they arrived at this picture, perhaps by using key words they had read. Following such discussion, students would choose one of the pictures (or redraw a new one) that was most representative of the posts they had read. Then the two groups would be rejoined in the language lab, and the two original pieces of art would be revealed and compared.

This activity requires a great deal of logistical planning, including the availability of two labs in close proximity, and two projectors. Further, to ensure that

the students in Room 2 were not waiting for those in Room 1 to post, those in Room 2 had their own picture to describe. Thus, two iterations of this activity were going on simultaneously.

Once the activity was in place, however, the process moved quickly with little direction from the instructor. Occasionally when students were stumped as to where to start, the instructor would ask them questions in the L2 about the painting, such as "Where is this?" or "What are these people doing?" This prompt usually kick-started their writing. To keep the activity moving, time limits were imposed on each part of the activity, namely how long the students had to examine the picture, write their post, read the posts of the others, draw a sketch, confer, and choose a representative sketch.

The most productive part of the activity came when the groups were rejoined and the two pictures revealed and compared. Often, students would gasp at the revealing of the picture. Students were often amazed that their pictures looked generally like the original: a successful communication exchange! Time was also allotted to discuss the communication exchange and problems that arose, as well as the cultural aspects of the piece of art.

Structured, Peer-Edited Process Writing

The blog, because of its collaborative nature, was also found to be a useful medium for structured, peer-edited process writing. Students in Elementary Spanish II used the blog to brainstorm ideas, post first drafts, receive peer feedback, request feedback from the instructor, and post final drafts. The fact that the most recent posts were presented first on the blog, followed by older posts—a feature that has come to be termed "reverse chronology"—allowed for quick recognition of the steps the final product had gone through, thus facilitating a focus on process.

Though done in all elementary levels, the largest implementation of this activity occurred as an intra-departmental project. Students in Intermediate Spanish II were assigned to write a newspaper article on a current news item particularly applicable to the Spanish-speaking world, such as the death of the Pope. Students posted their first drafts on the blog. Revision strategies were taught, such as underlining the verbs and checking for verb/subject agreement, to equip the students to be peer-editors. Once the first drafts of all students were up on the blog, students were then assigned to post revision comments on two of the articles. All students were assured that their papers were looked over by at least two of their peers. Then, students in the Advanced Grammar course were assigned to play the role of Editor and revise these articles again. Finally, students in Translation Techniques were assigned to translate the final drafts back to English. The two final editions—one in English, one in Spanish—were then put together to create a bilingual departmental newspaper addressing current topics.

The implementation of such a large-scale project as the one mentioned required an extreme degree of coordination among classes and faculty members. Because of the particular circumstances of the semester and the novelty of the activity, the newspaper never made it to print. The articles remained only in their

online forms. However, highlighting the process was more important to this activity than the product.

Authentic Blog Reading

Because an early focus of the blogs was an effort to improve writing, this last activity was used only briefly at the beginning of the semester and thus needs to be explored more fully in the future. Students were asked to join an authentic target-language blog, where topics ranged broadly from movies to philosophy. They were asked to read posts from the blog on a weekly basis. As it was extremely hard to check whether they were actually doing this assignment, this activity was dropped early in the semester. It might be possible in the future for students of corresponding target languages in other countries to correspond in their L1s, thus allowing each student to read authentic texts.

Affective Concerns

Besides disinhibition, as cited above in Ward (2004), the use of the blog in teaching writing in L2 classes encouraged more writing and naturally reduced the negative affective responses to writing, especially among reluctant writers. As mentioned earlier, a main goal in using blogs in the elementary courses was to lower inhibition to write in the L2. One possible way to do so would be to use new technology, such as the blog, which encourages greater speed and less inhibition.

On the other hand, the use of new technology creates its own affective concerns. Though most students used the blog with ease, it is helpful to consider the comments of the few who responded in a survey that they "experienced technical problems." Here are some unedited comments a few students made:

"I didn't check the confirmation e-mail on time and therefore couldn't post on the [blog]."

"[The blog] is hard to navigate."

"Hard to make ñ and accents, difficulty navigating, posting, and reading others comments sometimes (basic unfamiliarity)."

"My entries went into outer space."

To avoid the anxiety and frustration caused by technical problems and unfamiliarity with the medium, the instructor could distribute a handout at the beginning of each semester that outlines the exact steps of how to use the blog. Students could further be alerted to the possibility of difficulties and how to handle them.

Culture

Both "big C" and "little c" cultures can be integrated in blogs. In addition to integrating cultural topics and materials into the blog assignments (such as the "describe a scene" activity), the use of blogs encouraged discussion on the real-

life use of technology in Spanish-speaking cultures. The blogging service used by the class, <Livejournal.com>, hosted many Spanish-speaking blogs, just one of which the students were encouraged to read. Students got to see and imitate the authentic Spanish-language use of technology.

Further, students saw that language representing the technology of the computer and Internet is greatly influenced by English. The most basic example of this is that students learned that "a blog" in English is merely 'un blog' in Spanish. As mentioned earlier, many students quickly learned that their American-format keyboards were not the most efficient for "writing" in Spanish on the blog. Students initially struggled with key-codes for the entry of Spanish characters. These pedagogical tasks gave the students practice for Spanish-language uses of technology in future academic and real-life settings. One student in Intermediate Spanish II commented in class that "he had never typed in Spanish." This particular use of technology would be useful in his lifelong learning of Spanish.

Practical Concerns

Students from the elementary levels were asked to voluntarily submit comments regarding the use of the blog throughout the semester. Their comments reveal topics of practical concern that instructors may need to address. Though not exhaustive, their comments are divided into three areas: amount of technical knowledge necessary, preference for medium, and organization of posts.

Regarding technical knowledge, students offered the following comments in response to the questions "What did you like least about the blog?" and "What suggestions do you have for future use of blogs?":

"Unfamiliar with site."

"The fact that one had to be Internet capable or live on campus."

"Explain the site better."

"To give a more thorough explanation of how to use the blog."

These comments show that instructors should incorporate technology training, perhaps in L2, into the classroom when using blogs as a medium for assignments. Even at a technically-oriented university, some students will benefit from training.

Furthermore, teachers themselves may require some instruction with the medium to take full advantage of its capability. One of the instructors exclaimed that the medium was rather easy to learn, however. After setting up the blog, this instructor exclaimed, "I was flabbergasted that I could do this!" The other instructor took advantage of previous technical knowledge to later compare various blogging services and software, concluding that hosting one's own blog with blogging software, such as Wordpress or MoveableType, may be preferable to using a blogging service, such as <Blogger.com> or <Livejournal.com>.

Other student responses on the questionnaire showed that some students merely prefer to use a technological medium over a more traditional one or vice versa.

Comments revealing these preferences follow:

- “It is on the computer, and I would rather edit papers online because not everyone’s handwriting can be read easily, for example, mine.”
- “I like the interface and the chance to use a new medium.”
- “Students should be given a choice between blog and paper.”
- “Easier to write on paper.”
- “I think paper is more forgiving when trying to learn.”
- “I computer-compose better, so I enjoyed that a lot more.”
- “I simply prefer writing to typing; it is easier for me to absorb information.”
- “It is just as easy to blog as it is to write a paper.”

When considering the use of blogs, instructors may need to weigh student medium preferences along with time constraints, technology constraints, and lifelong learning benefits.

Students were particularly vocal about the organization of posts on the blog. Their comments included the following:

- “Often I would be intimidated by all the postings; I couldn’t find which one applied to me.”
- “Trying to find assignments and sorting through posts which were irrelevant to me.”
- “Make more sections for study help, random posts, class material, etc.”
- “Sections on the site would be good.”
- “I don’t like how people post outside of the topics; it messes up my friend’s page.”

More organization of the posts can be added to a blog through the use of categories or tags. The blogging service that the class used during the semester did not support categories or tags. Thus, in the future other blogging services or private hosting may be beneficial.

Conclusion

For the setting considered here, blogs proved effective for teaching writing skills. Their most important characteristic became their facilitation of peer review and collaboration. Students commented on this aspect frequently in response to the question “What did you like best about using the blog?”:

- “It provided opportunity for extra feedback.”
- “It was easy to use and it allowed me to learn from the work of fellow students.”
- “You can get other people’s input very easily.”

“The ability to quickly communicate with many people and receive rapid feedback.”

“Easy access and able to read what others posted.”

“Being able to talk outside class.”

Some future topics for research suggested by this study include the effect of blog use on the quantity and quality of final writing products, as well as on student perception and motivation. The effect of blog anonymity versus identification may also be explored. Further, the use of target language blogs as reading material was discussed only briefly here. Finally, there is a possibility that further technological advancement may replace blogs with another technological medium, much as word processing has replaced the typewriter. The definition of “writing” in light of technological advancement thus continues to change with each new writing medium. Blogs may play a role in shaping future communication, placing them as a tool to be considered in L2 instruction.

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