

On the Internet

Hungarian University Students' Blogs in EFL: Shaping Language and Social Connections

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Abstract

Blogging has by now well established itself in the popular media and particularly in education. In the latter context, creating, reading and commenting on blogs provide interaction with a real audience and promote students' self-expression. Interested in exploiting its potential in peer-to-peer EFL writing pedagogy at university, I started applying the blog as a medium and tool in a Hungarian B.A. program in EFL in 2006. Since then, over one hundred students have participated in blog projects over the past five semesters. In the present article, I focus on the linguistic and social benefits to students in the Fall 2008 semester from the activity of sharing their ideas and providing regular peer feedback on them.

The Course

EFL reading and writing skills (RWS) courses are a basic component of all B.A. programs in FL education in Hungary. At the University of Pécs, the second largest university in the country, this is a two-semester course usually taken in the first year of study. Because opportunities for continuing their studies at the M.A. level are rather limited, it is a crucial aspect at the launch of these programs nationwide that they equip students with practical skills at the undergraduate level.

In my courses in the past five semesters, I have aimed to make both the reading and writing activities relevant to the students by ensuring that some of the reading material was student-produced; hence their use of blogging as a tool for learning. To create an easy-to-reach hub for information related to the course (such as tasks, tips and reminders), and to provide a central area to store all student blog links, I set up my own blog, Take Off: Tips and Tasks for Readers and Writers <<http://take-o-f-f.blogspot.com>>.

In my teaching practice, I have aimed to incorporate those elements of process writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Horváth, 2001) that have been shown to contribute to both linguistic and social gains in the long term. A focus on the positive, on the message, rather than the form, and the involvement of not only the individual writer but of groups of peers have proven to be effective techniques. From this point of view, blogging can be seen as a form of process writing taken to the next level. It is not only a teacher or a even a limited number of people who may have an effect on the development of the target skills, but the participation of a full group of students, each of whom has a stake in each other's cooperation. The more involved they all are in creating entries and commenting on them, the more likely it is that this engagement establishes a viable learning environment (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

In the Fall 2008 semester, twenty-one students took the RWS course, which ran from September 9 to December 9, for a total of thirteen weeks. Of these students, the majority, eighteen, chose online blogging, with three students opting to show their weekly or bi-weekly printed posts only to me. In what follows I will give an account of the eighteen online blogs -- twelve by female, and six by male, students.

Blogger <<http://blogger.com>> is among the most popular, easy-to-use blog hosting sites. This site packs dozens of plug-ins that students enjoy browsing and adding to their pages. Although I have always made it clear that the main purpose is to produce text, it is understood that creating blogs that students find have just the right design for them is further motivating, as in the case shown in Figure 1 with the photo sharing plug-in used in one of the students' blogs <<http://senator888.blogspot.com/2008/11/pictures-of-my-friends.html>>.)



Figure 1: Photo plug-in on a blog

The students' own illustrations and photographs were often incorporated within the posts themselves; for example, with the snapshots taken at the Coldplay concert last year in Budapest on another of the students' blogs <<http://szoszo-k.blogspot.com/2008/10/frostyfrolic.html>> (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Student's concert photos as part of a blog entry

As a rule, I advise against the use in these blogs of pictures pasted from elsewhere on the Net as I aim to assist the students in providing their own materials. In the past several semesters this attitude appears to have worked. By the end of the course in question, there was much less reliance on non-original matter. This is an important outcome as copy-pasting can create confusion over what is truly original material and what has been replicated by clipping items from the Net for use in one's own blog post.

After all of these considerations, how does one go about evaluating work in a genre as personal as the blog? From the beginning, I have assumed that blogging is best done as a cooperative effort. Together with the first two groups in 2006 where blogging was a major component of the RWS course, the students and the teacher agreed on a set of ten criteria for the evaluation of the blogs. Over the past two years, the criteria and the marking have been revised. The wording of the most recent version is given here (and more information on the individual components can be found on the Take Off blog,

including the interpretation and relevance of friendly blog entries <<http://take-o-f-f.blogspot.com/2007/10/friendly-blog-entry.html>>).

1. Blog started by the time specified
2. Regular posts (one or more every second week)
3. Friendly posts
4. Regular comments on other students' blogs (one or more every week)
5. Spell-checked posts (no spelling and typing errors at all)
6. Fluent writing (coherent paragraphs, appropriate vocabulary)
7. Accurate writing (no major grammar slips)
8. Interesting posts (themes blogger enjoys writing about)
9. Customized blog
10. Individual option: (different from student to student)

Students were asked to tick those criteria that they thought applied to their work. For the individual option (number 10 in the list of criteria) each student needed to tell me ahead of time what else they thought should be considered as a quality in evaluating their blogs. Everyone was free to define that tenth assessment criterion. For this individual option, some students chose a quantitative, some a qualitative notion. For example, for students who wrote more regularly than others, this option was a higher than average number of blog entries. Qualitative criteria for the individual option included the depth of ideas, a specific theme that a student covered in an entry, and whether a student was able to apply, in their blog entries, various stylistic tips (such as the preference of the active to the passive voice and the omission of needless words--qualities of good writing that appeared in one of the course readings, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*).

This scheme was used by each student and me – the final score determined by simply adding up the score from the student's self-evaluation and that from my own assessment, using the same ten criteria. The blog (whether online or offline) counted as 30 percent of the final grade, with class participation, two reading and vocabulary tests, and a special project making up the remaining 70%. I considered it crucial to involve bloggers in the process of evaluation, as this was yet another factor in the development of learner independence and autonomy, which should always be an aim when sustainable skills are being practiced. As Stevens points out, "teachers who practice autonomy in their own professional development formulate heuristics for harvesting knowledge within their personal learning spaces, and thus stand a better chance of inculcating the desired behaviors in their students" (2007, p. 28). I believe such a stance was inherent in both my own blog and the way the RWS course aimed to encourage such a personal learning space. As for the feedback that students provide on each others' work and progress, this is another major component of the autonomy engendered (Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006).

The Linguistic and Social Gains: The Comments

As we have seen, online blogging was an option in the course, rather than an obligation. Eighteen students chose to participate, and with one exception, they not only posted entries (some more, some less regularly), but also shared comments on their peers' work. It is these remaining seventeen students' commentary that I will now examine in order to highlight the benefits afforded them in terms of language and community.

The 17 students made a total of 165 comments in the period under study. As one criterion was the regularity of comments, I kept tabs on this throughout the semester. On average, roughly ten comments were posted by each blogger. To be included in the tally, the comments had to be substantive. I did not count extremely short posts such as Yes, you're right and comments saying thank you for comments.

Although on the agreed upon date, the count had to stop, there was a most welcome occurrence. Many students continued both to post to their blogs and to share comments even after the official period was over.

For the most part members of this group engaged in a wide variety of commenting activity. The majority wrote weekly or bi-weekly, starting in mid-October and keeping it up till late November or early December. With more and more students registering and starting to post to their blogs, they saw evidence that their ideas and opinions, their questions and problems, their serious and humorous posts were being attended to. Thus the cycle of regular posting and commenting became a routine that many seemed to enjoy.

The majority of the comments were posted in October and November. When taking a closer look at the pattern of comments, after the initial slow traffic in early October, it can be observed that students increasingly took a liking to expressing their opinions about their peers' posts. On the other hand, in one extreme case, a student posted all her comments, seven, on one single day, which, naturally, could not be regarded as regular activity.

Some of these posts and comments were produced during class. Students were encouraged to bring printouts of blog posts to class, and these were first discussed in pairs or small groups, which was often followed up by students starting to draft a new entry or a new comment to be published online later. The quantity of language produced on these occasions was impressive indeed. What with the growing reluctance of many young people today to engage in time-consuming reading activities whose relevance to their own cultures and interests is not always immediately clear, the volume of language, both read and written in the posts and comments, provided some evidence that motivation was being maintained and in some cases even raised. (In Hungary, this is especially relevant as university students not infrequently come from high schools where commonly employed EFL writing activities rarely exploit the potential in creative expression— see, for example, Nikolov, 1999.)

A closer analysis of one student's case will perhaps highlight the importance of this issue even further. One student posted three rather interesting and detailed reports of various past school events. In terms of regularity of posting, his case can be considered below average. However, when it came to commenting, that is, reading other students' posts and reflecting on them and then sharing his own perspectives, he displayed the highest level of motivation. He wrote a total of twenty-nine comments, never more than a week apart.

Although this prolific commentator was exceptional, the entire blogging group made great strides in their fairly balanced posting and commenting. The network they developed in doing so fostered in them a growing awareness of context, of audience, and of options for further development. Each and every student tried to share mostly encouraging messages by focusing on what was commendable – but of course, such was not (and should not) be the only approach to commentary. In fact, I greatly enjoyed the somewhat heated debates that a few posts ignited.

When we take a look at the form of these comments, three categories are apparent.

(1) By far the most frequent comments were those that reformulated an idea in the original post and added a personal angle to it. Focusing on the content and perceived essence of the original entry and sharing a response to it showed how the students were becoming more and more aware of each other's interests, backgrounds, opinions, and language skills. Representative comments from this type include the following:

Comment 1: When I got about at the half of this post (which seemed a pile of . . . at that time) I was just about to quit reading. (Sorry, Chris.) But for some reason -perhaps for the freedom of will- I went on reading, and at the end I had to make an acknowledgement. You have a point. Congratulations! You made me thinking of it (certainly not about the chicken and the egg), and by this fact your theory proved to be correct. If I had decided not to finish reading, probably I wouldn't have had a reason for writing this comment. (Of which I ought to write more and more as we only have a few days till blog evaluation.)

Comment 2: I imagine 'predestination' in another way. Let me share with you my thoughts. 8-) In My Opinion there are more ways of life, from which we can choose. Every way has a determined ending (so it's predestination), but you have to choose from them (it's your free will). In my way of thinking these two things (free will and predestination) can exist together, in perfect harmony.

Comment 3: I often do that too on buses, watching people. But I don't like aggressive old ladies, sometimes they can be very frightening :)

(2) There were frequent evaluative, mostly positive, comments as well, which mainly served to maintain the connection between reader and writer. They often resulted in

response from the original poster, again re-enforcing the language and social gains the blog framework aimed to help bring out:

Comment 4: It's not an average short story, and I like it very much:)
Will it be the entry of the week?? I think it will be....:)

Comment 5: Szoszo, it was hilarious! :D Really-really great! hehe . . .
:D

Comment 6: The story wasn't really catchy for my taste, but the text was eloquent with nice metaphors.

Comment 7: I would be glad if you summarized your teaching experience in a post. I'm quite interested in it (and I think it's a good topic). Thanks in advance.

Comment 8: You are a strong boy, never give up. This story is really touching. Take care.

(3) The third type of comment was where the comments formed threads, with students responding to each other's comments to one another. Usually, these were the exchanges that involved the most heated debates. The most interesting such debate was triggered by a student's post about pulp fiction, popular TV series like *Sex and the City*, and fine literature. According to the original entry, one should avoid consuming too much popular culture as it may be as addictive as drugs. The post attracted eleven comments, the majority written by two students who held opposing views on the issue. Others joined in too, and I also succumbed to an urge to share my two cents' worth by saying that it was normal for everyone to form their own attitudes and opinions. A sample of how the students argued:

Comment 9: I would have to argue with that. *Sex And The City* is a book adaptation. It isn't even pulp fiction. It's a piece of literature of our time.

Comment 10: First of all *Sex and the city* is not the part of fine literature. It is a perfect specimen of mass-literature or "consumer-literature". Secondly, there we cannot talk about "big-hits" in the reform age. There was no consumer society, not even citizen-society, no free-market economy, in this time fine-literature was the only literature.

Comment 11: Everybody needs to kick back and let some steam out sometimes. Because let's not forget that in the end we are talking about a COMEDY and a very good one at that.

Finally, at the end of the course, I asked my students to share their comments with me. In this anonymous feedback, I invited them to complete the phrase "In this course..." Several students reflected in their response on the blog and the comments:

Student 1: . . . I had the special opportunity to learn how to share my deepest thoughts, fears and feelings with my faithful readers, meet nice, new people who have wonderful personality.

Student 2: . . . I didn't feel pressured at all, I felt like I was doing something very enjoyable and that made progress a lot easier.

Student 3: . . . I had the opportunity to improve my reading and writing skills in English by doing creative work, reading and commenting on others' blogs.

Student 4: . . . I've become a much more fluent reader. I've learned to evaluate blogs and have become a much better thinker than I was before. I've learned to take full responsibility for what I write and to feel free to show the "world" who I am and what I believe in.

Conclusion

For university courses devoted to the development of reading and writing skills in foreign languages, the blog approach has been shown to contribute to both stronger community bonding and to greater individual autonomy. In my own context, the B.A. courses in RWS have provided an opportunity to test the viability of relying on student initiative in fostering a discourse community. It stands to reason that the students could have made linguistic and social gains through other channels, too. One should never fail to notice individual differences in this respect. In fact, the ones who opted to participate through offline blogging (the three students who printed their news, reviews, and reflections only for me) also managed to pass the course with fairly good results. What they missed, however, was the regular participation in a network of communication that was open, welcoming and stimulating. As we continue to explore the benefits blog creation offers in FL writing pedagogy, we will no doubt find many examples we can adopt and adapt. It is my hope that the present paper has managed to contribute to this ongoing conversation.

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