

Incorporating Blogs and Discussion Forums for the Benefit of Language Learning:
Annotated Bibliography and Literature Review

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Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, B. (2006). Web 2.0: A new wave of innovation for teaching and learning? *EDUCAUSE Review*, 41(2), 33-44. Retrieved from <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0621.pdf>

A guide to a plethora of social networking sites and associated search sites with commentary, this article is useful and time-saving for the educator looking to choose and implement blogging, wiki-ing and the like. It prompts thinking about the future of education and possibilities around the classroom and campus.

This article presents blogs as a new kind of text: reverse-chronological with extensive hyperlinking. They are “a new type of practice” (33). In my realm, ELL classes need to ensure literacy across different types of text. Given the new genres in Web 2.0, it makes sense to include Web 2.0 elements in class communications and study.

Arslan, R.Ş. and Şahin-Kızıl, A. (2010). How can the use of blog software facilitate the writing process of English language learners? *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 23(3), 183 – 197. doi: 10.1080/09588221.2010.486575; AN 51174791

A quasi-experimental study that supports blogging software as a potential resource for improving student writing in the ELL classroom, this article also outlines limitations: grammar, mechanics, vocabulary did not improve, but content and organization did.

Blogging and blog use allowed transcendence of usual time limitations of the face-to-face class, thus allowing students the gift of time. For ELL, time is a critical element. Students need time to process, explore, and play with language. This gives them a supportive environment to do that

in. Blogs also give teachers access to students' work for timely feedback and allow students access to additional resources: an audience beyond the classroom and online materials.

Extending on the ideas presented here, interaction online increases language input.

The students used in this study sound roughly approximate to mine in terms of language level, as do the instruction and curriculum they receive in this writing class, so I would expect similar results if I use blogging in a similar way. This was restricted to process-based writing, so if I incorporate additional tools such as discussion forums – also shown to enhance writing (Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell, 2007) – then I should be able to reap additional benefits.

The positive results in this study are attributed to the larger audience, noting the benefit may be elusive if writing is still only intended for the teacher. Is peer evaluation is an extension enough given privacy concerns around extending to general public?

This study is relevant in terms of concrete application of blogs to ELL with cautions concerning using technology for technology's sake. It needs to be purposeful, well-founded use.

Downes, S. (2004). Educational Blogging. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 5 (38). Retrieved from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0450.pdf>

This article outlines the history of blogging and then moves into educational applications with blogging benefits such as students get to know each other better in a non-threatening way.

Downes prompts considerations of inherent complications in required blogging: "What happens when the necessary rules and boundaries of the system are imposed on students who are writing blogs, when grades are assigned in order to get students to write at all?" (23-24); he cautions that

blogging is not for everyone and that contrived/prescribed blogging not the same as blogging out of free will and inspiration. These may be critical elements to consider as a teacher in terms of how these elements influence the outcomes. But, if the outcome is that students *do* then engage in writing and then their writing improves, is this really a dilemma? People often need prompting to engage in new activities that they otherwise may not have engaged in, but then once they have tried it, they then can continue by choice beyond the prescribed activity in the constrained environment or discontinue when they are no longer required to.

Fisch, K. (2007). Blogging: In Their Own Words. *The Fischbowl*. Retrieved from <http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com/2007/06/blogging-in-their-own-words.html>

Students reflect on their blogging experiences over the past year, highlighting the opportunity to see what others have to say, reflect, keep the discussion going, post questions, dig deeper, and not be limited by time to get their say in. Students have greater opportunity to interact and build their own ideas rather than just listening to what the teacher thinks. They suggest it is a potential debate environment for ideas they do not get to express in class.

“Scribe posts”: taking turns, students post their notes from class onto a set page. They describe how this is helpful for absent students – they do not miss out. In my opinion, this is great in legitimate circumstances, but it also helps students who skip. Could it encourage skipping? (ELL is a class many don’t want to be in in the first place, so knowing they could skip and still get notes is not exactly incentive to attend.)

Live/fishbowl blogging: the online discussion happens in the face-to-face class with all students logging in at the same time. Students feel safe and have the opportunity to make more

connections. This eliminates the “don’t everyone talk at once!” problem. Students don’t have to wait to be called on, can express short thoughts or longer thoughts without becoming intimidated halfway through speaking, and see what they want to say before they ‘say’ it.

Blogging creates a written record of the discussion and builds sense of community, giving each participant a voice.

I like this article and video for the students’ and teachers’ perspective it offers in addition to the range of online discussion modes they participate in. It is reasonably current (2007).

Hsu, H.-Y., Wang, S.-K., Comac, L. (2008). [Using audioblogs to assist English-language learning: an investigation into student perception](https://doi.org/10.1080/09588220801943775). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 21(2), 181-198. DOI: 10.1080/09588220801943775; (AN 31483391) Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09588220801943775>

This article focuses on oral language learning and student perception. Audio is commonly perceived to be overlooked in online environments, so this offers helpful potential. Student perception affects student engagement. Before reading, I wondered if this article may not be relevant in a blended course as most of the aural/oral work would happen in the face-to-face environment. I recant that thought. This study used audioblogs to enhance the face-to-face class, thus creating a blended learning environment.

Immediate feedback is simply not possible for all students in the face-to-face class and is especially difficult with introverted students. In my situation, there is usually a large percentage of quiet students, so accurate informal oral assessment can be challenging. Audioblogs would

provide an oral/aural record allowing students to review and connect feedback to their speech (adding their own self-directed feedback as well as they can now hear themselves as others do).

This article cautions against using technology that requires a heavy cognitive load or learning curve as these can distract from the language learning itself. Studies where the CALL (computer assisted language learning) software was not intuitive show the experimental groups that used it learned less than their control group counterparts in traditional face-to-face classes. It states audioblogs are user-friendly (184). Audioblog equipment requirements may be prohibitive for some, exciting and intuitive for most. It appears more complicated than I would want it to be to incorporate it without assistance (too much potential for problems that would lead us away from language learning. In the study, the researchers provided technical and instructional assistance).

This study is an excellent resource if I do go ahead with audioblogs, which could be very beneficial, but I will need to assess the pay-off against time-management including additional workload beyond usual, manageable allotments for work and how time required to manage audioblogs could skew my available time for other prep and marking activities.

Montero B., Watts F., Garcia-Carbonell A. (2007). Discussion forum interactions: Text and context. *System*, 35(4), 566-582. [doi:10.1016/j.system.2007.04.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2007.04.002)

Modal verbs are characteristic in asynchronous discussion forums. This paper found discussion forums to be reflective of oral language and so modal verbs are used similarly. This extends to support that DFs may be one sensible avenue toward the development of oral language skills.

So then, as long as students have been instructed in proper use of modal verbs, discussion forums should be a good arena in which to practice them.

Controversy: this must be kept in mind as a middle or transitional ground. One cannot learn to speak via writing alone. They must actually speak. However, if the writing is reflective of the speech and writing is 'safer,' it may be a good place to start for the timid learner and good enforcement of learning for all learners (hear the internal monologue before manifesting the sounds in actual conversation).

Wesch, M. (2007). *A Vision of Students Today (and What Teachers Must Do)*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/10/a-vision-of-students-today-what-teachers-must-do/>

A cultural anthropologist's class of Net-Generation ("N-Gen": Tapscott, 2004) students reveal their styles and behaviours: "I will read 8 books this year...2300 web pages"; "I complete 49% of the readings assigned to me...only 26% is relevant to my life"; "I will write 42 pages for class this semester...and over 500 pages of email." Wesch discusses the disconnect between the teacher at the front demanding attention and the students who appear to be listening but are really on Facebook. His solution is for teachers to reconnect what they teach with what students perceive as their "real world." He suggests embracing the potential of the technology they bring with them to reach meaningful objectives.

These students' statements indicate to me that while I and most traditional teachers will hold onto the idea that students still need to know how to write with a pen(cil) and read a book (a paper one), these tools feel irrelevant to them, prompting disengagement. I agree with Wesch: teachers must make efforts to remain current. There is a sense that technology changes so fast that trying to keep up is pointless. This – while familiar – is a cop out and will not connect us to

our students and worse, will create a divide between our students and us. Students will resist us and what we have to say because what we have to offer feels archaic and irrelevant.

Literature Review

Students in an English Language Learners' (ELL) classroom are typically there out of necessity. It is not that they love learning English. They need to learn English to reach other goals. Often, in my situation as a high school ELL teacher, students are under heavy time constraints to learn the language of instruction while also completing the regular five year curriculum - ten years or more of learning within five years or less (Cummins, as cited in ESL Consultant, 2004). They cannot afford inefficient instructional approaches. Incorporating technology into an ELL classroom needs to be based in sound pedagogy to improve the learning environment and rate of acquisition for this group of learners. Done right, heeding the successes and cautions of the research literature, technology integration may be the duly responsible move in respecting all that ELLs need to accomplish (which is, to learn English) in order to move forth to their greater goals.

A Change in Pedagogy

With the genuine goal of having capable students proceed with confidence in their ability, knowing their accomplishments are hard-earned and represent secure knowledge within them, I have run my classes precisely as Gee critiques: "Classrooms tend to encourage and reward individual knowledge stored in the head" (2007, p. 103, as cited in Mabrito and Medley, 2008).

Additional literature review, however, prompts serious critique of top-down approaches and consideration of social constructivist approaches to language learning whereby procedures will in fact enhance working knowledge of the language. Communities of learning, easily constructed in guided online forums, fit perfectly within this constructivist approach, encouraging me that incorporating technology may be the best approach to language acquisition.

Connecting with Our Students

Teachers' incorporation of technology may reconnect students with both us and the curricula we put upon them (Wesch, 2008, Anderson, 2008). Wesch (2008) discusses the disconnect between the teacher at the front demanding attention and the students who appear to be listening and taking diligent notes on their laptops but are really on Facebook. His solution is for teachers to reconnect what they teach and how they require students to learn with what students perceive as their 'real world.' Wesch (2008) suggests teachers embrace the existing technology students bring with them and regularly engage with them as learning technologies to reach meaningful objectives. "The task of the online course designer and teacher now... is to choose, adapt, and perfect, through feedback, assessment, and reflection, educational activities that maximize the affordances of the Web" (Anderson, 2008, p. 68). In accordance with Anderson (2008), possibilities offered by Web 2.0 applications have potential to seriously enhance education in a socially constructivist way, reconnecting students with engaged learning. Given that a percentage of my students, not inclined to be labeled by not having been born into an English-speaking family, are inclined to resent and disengage from their ELL course requirements, taking measures to reconnect them with engaged learning is only prudent.

Considering Student Perception; Giving Students a Voice

In Fisch (2007), Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008), and Wesch (2007), student perceptions toward learning via blogging are positive; students are motivated by the technological venue, perceiving it as relevant and appealing. Students communicating through Wesch (2007) point out how we, teachers, continue to use tools - such as scantron, pencil and paper - which feel irrelevant to them. Persistent use of these tools only further alienates students who are increasingly convinced that what we offer is archaic, causing further student disengagement. In contrast, a pilot study in the use of audioblogs (Hsu, Wang and Comac, 2008), which are somewhat more complicated to set up than regular blogs, shows the majority of students perceived themselves as more successful in their efforts to learn English. Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008) conclude that, with regular use and prompt, accurate and empowering teacher-given feedback in small classes (they recommend a 10 student maximum), the audioblog is a beneficial easy-to-use tool that does not distract from the assignment at hand. Our classes run between 12 and 22 students per class, so with Hsu, Wang and Comac's (2008) admission that the time required to give proper feedback to the students also reduced the teacher's available time for activities such as resource sourcing and course development, benefits of audioblogs should be interpreted cautiously and perhaps reserved for later – a secondary phase of technology integration in my classes. Fisch's (2007) interviews with students engaged in class-based blogging, however, report extremely positive outcomes.

Among positive attributes of blogging, students highlight the opportunity to see what others say, reflect, keep the discussion going, post questions, probe for further analysis, and not being limited by time (Fisch, 2007). Students report greater opportunity to interact and build their own ideas rather than “just listening to what the teacher thinks” (Fisch, 2007). They

additionally report the blog as a debate environment for ideas they were not able to express during class and delineate types of blogging, such as “scribe posts,” where students take turns posting the day’s notes, and “live” or “fishbowl” blogging, where all students log in simultaneously during class and have a synchronous “in-class” discussion online (Fisch, 2007). The scribe posts concern me: ideal for the legitimately ill student whom no one wants to fall behind, the scribe post also seems an enabler of student-driven truancy. No teacher likes to admit his or her class could be any less than the pinnacle of mental stimulation and academic ecstasy, but truly it happens, and as previously stated, my particular demographic does have a percentage less inclined to accept their placement and more inclined to seek alternate geographical situations come class time. However, the fishbowl blogging technique facilitates a welcome and participatory ambiance, allowing each individual a voice. Students from Fisch’s school describe the fishbowl environment as one that feels safe and facilitates more connections than traditional discussions (Fisch, 2007). I interpret this as an empowering vehicle, meeting students in a chat-like environment they relate to and are more inclined to determine is relevant and worthy of their time. It may also put more pressure on them to verbalize (in written form) their thoughts as they can no longer hide under the guise of limited class time. Conversely, for more stimulating or controversial topics where students *want* to voice an opinion, the fishbowl counters the everyone-talking-at-once problem, allowing each to be ‘heard’ simultaneously. Students would not have to wait to be called on, could express longer thoughts without becoming intimidated partway through speaking, and see what they say before they ‘say’ it. There is both power and sound pedagogy in enabling students’ voices and building strong learning communities as an extension of the face-to-face classroom.

Web 2.0 Applications: New Genres for Literacy and Understanding

Richardson (2004, as cited in Downes, 2004) and Alexander (2006) identify blogging as a genre of writing unto its own, with its reverse-chronological structure and extensive hyperlinking. Blogs' valuable potential for literacy and critical thinking skill development (Richardson, 2004, as cited in Downes, 2004) and increased prevalence and relevance prompt consideration that this emerging literary form should be included in a language class. Downes (2004) also cites the blog as a forum for sharing culture and personal interests; with cultural diversity inherent in the ELL classroom, cultural investigation and idea-sharing have perpetual potential as roads to greater interpersonal and intercultural understanding.

The Mechanics of Language

Writing is a critically important element of academic language acquisition, so to incorporate blogging and other Web 2.0 applications in my instructional practice, they must benefit writing skills. Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010), in a quasi-experimental study, determined that blogging software enhanced the content and organization of ELLs' writing. Transcending limitations of the regular classroom, blogging gifted these students with time, exposure and resources, critical elements for language learners who need to process, explore and play with language before they can excel in it. Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010) caution that writing mechanics such as grammar and vocabulary did not improve and that part of the benefit seems to come from the sense of an audience beyond just the teacher, so it is important to supplement with additional lessons and feedback from others.

Keeping the importance of writing and grammar in mind, discussion forums (DFs) give support to modal verb usage (Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell, 2007). According to

Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell (2007), DFs reflect oral language and so use modal verbs similarly. So then, provided students have been instructed in proper modal verb usage, discussion forums should be a good arena in which to practice them with the support of the community of learners. Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell (2007) also point out DFs “promote [student] involvement in discussion threads which produce meaningful communication in real contexts, making discussion forums an active language learning tool” (n.p.). Written text reflective of speech, DFs may be sensible vehicles toward the development of both writing skills and emergent oral language skills.

Conclusion

The more active we can make learning for our students, prompting them to become engaged and responsible for the construction of knowledge, guiding them as they go, the more expeditious their learning should become, thus furthering their progress towards their goals beyond language learning. The literature supports blogging and discussion forums as sensible active learning tools for the advancement of language education.

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