Using blogs in an EFL writing class

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Abstract
Since 1998, weblogs (or ‘blogs’) have gained increasing notice in the cyberspace community because even people without programming experience can also easily update and publish their personal web sites (Blood, 2000). More and more foreign educators have applied this user-friendly technology to classroom instruction and language learning (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Richardson, 2004a); however, it seems that relatively few English teachers have ever used blogs in an EFL writing class here in Taiwan. Although not originally created for use in language education, blogs have formidable potentials as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing class. The main objectives of this paper are (1) to give explicit instructions to set up a personal blog with ‘Blogger’ (a free blogging service), (2) to discuss the advantages of blog in an EFL writing class, (3) to give a preliminary report about my students’ reactions to the use of blog in two English classes, and (4) to suggest some further research on blogs and some other application of blog to English learning and teaching.

Introduction
Blogs, online personal journals that are frequently updated, have existed in the cyberspace community since 1998. In August of 1999 the release of Blogger, a free blog hosting service, fostered the rapid growth of blog sites (Blood, 2000). Later, blog genre extended into various professional realms especially journalism and business. The cover story of the first issue of Fortune magazine in 2005 introduces “10 tech trends to watch in 2005”, and blog ranks the first one. “According to blog search-engine and measurement firm Technorati”, Fortune reports, “23,000 new weblogs are created every day – or about one every three seconds” (p.34). No wonder the author claims that blogs have become a force that business can’t afford to ignore.

Blogs may be still strange to some English teachers here in Taiwan. What on earth is a blog? According to Webopedia, an online encyclopedia dedicated to computer technology, blog is defined as “Short for Web log, a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.” I first found out the free blog construction service of Blogger in the middle of 2003 and immediately created an experimental blog titled “ESL teaching” in my personal website. However, while it was quite convenient to update my ideas about ESL teaching in this blog, I had difficulty adding sidebar links and making my archives function properly. That blog site has hibernated since then. In September 2004, I realized that Blogger also offered Blog*spot URL address as its blog hosting platform. I tried to create another blog hosted on blogger.com and found that it was pretty user-friendly and all the functions worked properly. Because blog features its easy-to-use interface, frequent text update, and interactive comment area, most educators applied their blogs to reading or writing classes (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Oravec, 2002; Wilder & Merritt, 2004).

Setting up a Blog Site
There are many websites featuring free blog hosting services. Creating a blog at Blogger will be used as an example here to give clear instruction. After you enter Blogger website (http://www.blogger.com), it will take you only about ten minutes to create a personal blog. Blogger offers 3 easy steps to create a blog – (1) create an account, (2) name your blog, and (3) choose a template. In the first step, you only have to fill in all the basic information such as user name, password, and email, etc. Then, you have to give your blog a title and decide its URL address. If you would like to host your blog at Blogger, you have to choose a unique name before.blogspot.com. For example, one of my blogs is named as ‘chuenglishwriting1’; therefore, the complete URL address of that blog is http://chuenglishwriting1.blogspot.com. If you would like to put your blog in your personal website, you then have to enter advanced blog setup to configure some blog details. Finally, after you pick up your favorite template, you can start writing down your own thoughts and publish them in the cyberspace. Most data you fill in
except user name and password can be altered later if you change your mind.

Once you set up a blog, you are the administrator of that web site and own every right to create, edit, and delete postings. Under the ‘setting’ category, you can get into its sub-categories to tune up functions such as ‘publishing’, ‘formatting’, ‘commenting’, and ‘archiving’ etc. For instance, you can decide who can comment your blog and whether you want to show or hide reader’s comments. With some basic knowledge of HTML, users can customize the layout of their blog, add photos, and even insert a piece of audio clip.

**Advantages of Blogs in an EFL Writing Class**

Because blog design and maintenance is so easy compared to using other traditional web creation software (e.g. *Frontpage*, *Dreamweaver*, etc.), it is an ideal tool for non-technie faculty to construct and manage their own website. In addition to easy use, blogs in an EFL writing class has the following advantages.

1. Johnson (2004) points out that the application of blogs is a useful supplemental aid to teachers. From any computer connected to the Internet, teachers can create, edit, or delete their teaching handouts such as notes, homework assignment, and review materials. All these teacher’s messages will be organized in a reversed chronological order with the latest postings on the top.

2. Blogs can promote exploration of English websites (Campbell, 2004). Since it is quite simple for teachers to put English materials on line with links to their source websites, students have more chances to read related articles.

3. The feature of automatic date-stamping for each post is quite useful. Students’ emails may, for some technical glitches, not reach their teachers or be carelessly deleted by their teachers. With the automatic date-stamping function, both teachers and students know clearly when students turned in their assignments. On the other hand, the automatic archive of past posts by date or theme can help teachers and students easily locate the message they are searching.

4. If students do not have their own personal websites, an easy-to-use blog is a good start for them to interact with users of the cyberspace community. As Campbell (2004) emphasizes that simple customization of templates can help students build “a sense of ownership and unique online identity”. Most students will write more carefully if they know that they are going to publish their articles online for authentic readers who may comment on their postings.

5. Teachers can easily use the blog to organize a collaborative learning environment in which students can peer edit others’ postings (Dieu, 2004; Mitchell, 2003). Students should be encouraged to comment their partner’s postings, which can also be shared by other classmates.

6. In an article describing how blogs are integrated with educational activity as resources both for students and teachers, Oravec (2002) claimed that blog development can “empower students to become more analytical and critical” (p.618). Although she didn’t present any statistical data to prove that students using blogs would become more analytical and critical, I believe that students who are aware that their postings and comments will be read by their classmates will be more careful before they post them.

**Subjects**

In the fall semester of 2004, students of two classes were used as subjects to solicit feedback to the use of blog in an English class. The background of these two English classes is briefly described as follows:

**Class A**

Most of the thirty-five engineering-related freshmen have intermediate level in English writing. This required freshman English class meets for two hours a day, twice a week.

**Class B**

Sixteen English major freshmen also have intermediate level in English writing. This required English writing class meets for two hours a day, one time every week.

Both class A and B were given clear instructions in the beginning of the semester on how to set up a personal blog with *Blogger* hosting service. In class A, the use of blog is strongly encouraged but not required. In other words, the use of blog does not count their final score. On the other hand, the use of blog in class B was required and it counted 20% of their final grade. A blog survey (see the appendix) was conducted to both classes in the end of 2004 when the semester was almost over.
Survey Results

Because I found out the free blogging service of Blogger in the beginning of September 2004, I was also a blog novice then. I taught students how to create their own blog. Since students in class A are not English major, they were only encouraged to post their homework assignments on their blogs while students in class B were asked to write at least 7 online journals. Analysis of survey findings will be elaborated below.

Visibility of blogs in Taiwan

First of all, blogs are not well-known around the young generation in Taiwan. As many as 36 (75%) respondents hadn’t heard about what a blog was before I asked them to create one; 5 (10%) had heard about it, but had no idea what it was; 4 (8%) had heard about it and also had a rough idea what it was. Only 3 (6%) respondents had their own blog.

Creation and operation of a blog

Most students felt it was quite easy to set up their own blog with Blogger. 32 (66%) students felt that it was quite easy to create their own blog and the rest had no opinion to this question. Computers will show ‘not found’ error message if you enter a blog without any postings. Some students told me their blog URL before they posted their first message on it, which made me keep telling them that their blogs didn’t work. A couple of students were frustrated when they found I couldn’t enter their blogs. The fact is that they hadn’t posted any messages yet.

In terms of photo blogging, even after students were shown my blog with a photo, 33 (68%) respondents didn’t know how to post photos on their blogs. I didn’t give students step-by-step instruction, hoping that they figured out how they could post images themselves. It seems that most of them were either not interested in posting any photos or didn’t have enough computer literacy to do that.

The application of blogs in an English class

As far as the quantity of blog is concerned, the result is quite disappointing. 17 (35%) students confessed that they posted fewer than three articles and 20 (41%) of them said they only posted three to five articles. In the beginning of the fall semester 2004, I also encouraged my students to invite their classmates to read and comment their postings. However, 33 (68%) respondents indicated that they hadn’t invited their friends or classmates to read their blog. Here are some of the reasons why they didn’t invite their classmates to read their blog: ‘It’s quite a shame to ask someone to read my blog’, ‘I didn’t post a lot articles’, ‘I don’t have enough confidence to share my ideas with my friends’, ‘What I write is too personal, so I don’t want to share with them’, ‘I would like to keep my privacy, for I may post some articles that mention my classmates’, and ‘I think that articles I posted were not good enough’. As few as 8 respondents said that their friends or classmates had ever posted comments on their blog.

While only 8 of them posted more than eight articles in one semester, overwhelming majority of them agreed that it was a good idea to post articles on a blog. 41 (85%) students believed that posting articles on their blog is a good idea. It seems that there is still a wide gap between belief and action. The fact that most students agree that posting articles on a blog is a good idea can not be transformed into an action to post more articles. Similarly, more than half of them believed that it was a good idea to use blog in an English writing class and only one student did not agree with this idea.

Finally, I brought up a possible cross-cultural project in the future – a team blog with students from another country. 36 (75%) respondents seconded this proposal, which gave me a compelling reason to carry out this project next semester.

Effectiveness of blog in an English writing class

In a short blog posting titled ‘Do weblogs improve writing?’, Bernstein (2004) advocated ‘Frequent writing improves writing’, ‘Writing for an audience improves writing’, ‘Writing that matters improves writing’, and ‘Writing on a computer improves writing’. However, to EFL learners, frequent writing may not necessarily improve writing. Nevertheless, it will definitely be helpful if students do not only write frequently but also look up English dictionaries or use Internet to help them express their ideas clearly and correctly. EFL learners’ writings will be more or less influenced by their first language. The improvement of writing will be questioned if EFL students write English frequently but present their thoughts with the style of their first language. To my surprise, 44 (91%) respondents answered that they would look up an English dictionary or ask
someone else when they didn’t know how to express their ideas in English. To an EFL learner, it is a critical step to become a successful writer if whenever he is aware that something wrong with his writing, he can effectively find an answer from an English dictionary or Internet.

Advanced Application of Blogs

It is an exciting and refreshing experience to use blogs in English classes. However, if you have a class with 40 students and all of them have their own blog, it is quite tiring to monitor their update regularly. Johnson (2004) believes that the application of blogs in English teaching “appears to still be in its infancy”. However, this infant seems to grow up fast and has an immense potential to become a fully-fledged adult soon. With the recent development of RSS, teachers can effortlessly keep track of students’ blog activities without manually visiting every individual blog. RSS, an XML-based format for content distribution, can stand for either ‘Rich Site Summary’ or ‘Real Simple Syndication’. There are two kinds of news-feed collectors (also called ‘aggregators’) – application-based (e.g. SharpReader) and web-based service (e.g. Bloglines). A free, web-based aggregator like bloglines.com (see Fig. 1) is better than application-based one such as SharpReader in terms of mobility and flexibility. After you subscribe to the RSS feed of each student’s blog, you can read all of your student’s blogs in one site from any computer connected to Internet. If you download ‘notifier’ and install it, you will be notified whenever your subscription has new items to read. Another advantage of aggregator is that you can organize blogs by students’ real name rather than pseudonyms (Campbell, 2004). In a short, with the help of RSS, both teachers and students can efficiently classify and organize their blog subscription and transform a blog into a reservoir of expert knowledge.

Figure 1: A screenshot of RSS feed reader from bloglines.com

Another recent trait of blogs is to insert an audio clip to your blog from any phone. However, even if the initial subscription rate is as low as US$3 a month, the jury is still out on whether this trendy feature will last long. Right now the audblog telephone number is located in the United States, which means bloggers outside U.S.A. have to make an international phone call to record an audio file.

Suggestions for Further Study of Blog Use in an English Class

First, since you can create more than one blog in blogger.com, it is recommended that teachers can set up a class blog as the outcome of the collaborative effort of an entire class. You can add ‘members’ to one of your blogs and those members and you can all serve as contributors to this certain blog. They can not only give comments but also post, edit, and delete
Second, Campbell (2004) pointed out one of the major difficulties that EFL teachers using blogs in a class would face was “lack of participation from readers outside the classroom”. In fact, my survey results also proved this argument. Some free blogging services (e.g., Blogger) offer ‘interests’, ‘favorite movies’, ‘favorite music’, and ‘favorite books’ features so that users can quickly locate those people who share mutual interests, which may facilitate social interaction with members from the cyberspace community. For instance, through ‘English teaching’ interest, I found an English teacher in France whose students may cooperate with mine to create some cross-cultural team blogs. Students should be encouraged to list their interests in a more specific way and post comments on those blogs whose owners share similar interests to them. It has at least two advantages for students to get actively involved in their friends’ blogs. First, after making frequent visits and posting comments on their blogs, students may receive comments from their friends. Second, once students get involved in this authentic setting to use English, they will not only sense the importance of English in this international cyberspace but also strive to express their thoughts in English correctly or understand comments that are posted on their site.

Conclusion

Probably the most famous, or should I say infamous, episode in the blogosphere in 2004 was that CBS anchor Dan Rather, a symbol of mainstream media, announced his retirement because his 60 Minutes scoop based on memos criticizing President George W. Bush’s service in the Texas Air National Guard was questioned by bloggers within a half hour of the broadcast. Later the CBS documents were proved to be forgeries. Blog, an emerging technology in the late of 1990s, is not just another kind of website but has become a universally recognized genre in cyberspace. No matter whether you like it or not, the omnipresence of blog is an indisputable fact. With the recent development of RSS and easy-to-use photo blogging, it is not surprising that blogs were integrated into many fields of study.

Even though blogging service is free and user-friendly, whether they can be used effectively in language learning and teaching still depends on how the course using blogs is designed. I am still a novice at the use of blogs in an English class. Nevertheless, most survey results I received were supportive and encouraging. With a well-organized instructional design, a blog definitely is a plus to English teachers.

References

Richardson, W. (2004a). Blogging and RSS – the “what’s it?” and “how to” of powerful new Web tools for
Appendix

Blog Survey

1. How long have you used Internet?
   _____ A. more than 8 years  _____ B. 5 ~ 8 years  _____ C. 3 ~ 5 years
   _____ D. fewer than 3 years

2. Had you heard about blog or had your own blog before I asked you to set up your own blog?
   _____ A. Yes, I had heard about it, but I had no idea what it was.
   _____ B. Yes, I had heard about it and also had a rough idea what it was.
   _____ C. No, I hadn’t heard about it.
   _____ D. Yes, I had had my own blog.
   What blogging service did you use?

3. Do you feel it is quite easy to establish your own blog site with Blogger?
   _____ A. quite easy  _____ B. quite hard  _____ C. no opinion

4. Do you have your own personal website?
   _____ A. Yes, I do.)  _____ B. No, I don’t. (Skip question 5)

5. Do you think blog is easier to maintain than your own website?
   _____ A. Yes, I do  _____ B. No, I don’t.

6. How many articles have you posted on your blog? (roughly estimated)
   _____ A. more than 15  _____ B. 10 ~ 15  _____ C. 8 ~ 10
   _____ D. 5 ~ 8  _____ E. 3 ~ 5  _____ F. fewer than 3

7. Do you agree blog is a useful tool for you to share your ideas with others in the cyberspace?
   _____ A. Yes, I do.
   _____ B. No, I don’t.
   Why? ______________________________________
   _____ C. No opinion.

8. Have you invited your friends or classmates to read your blog?
   _____ A. Yes, I have.
   _____ B. No, I haven’t. (Skip question 9)
   Why? ______________________________________

9. Have your friends or classmate posted comments on your blog?
   _____ A. Yes, they have.
   How many?
   _____ B. No, they haven’t.

10. Do you agree that posting your articles on your blog is a good idea?
Using blogs in an EFL writing class

10. Do you use blogs in your English class (writing class)?
   ____ A. Yes, I do.
   ____ B. No, I don’t.
   Why? ________________________________________________________
   ____ C. No opinion.

11. Do you know how to post photos on your blog?
   ____ A. Yes, I do.  ____ B. No, I don’t.

12. Do you agree it is a good idea to use blog in English class (writing class)?
   ____ A. Yes, I do.
   ____ B. No, I don’t.
   Why? ________________________________________________________
   ____ C. No opinion.

13. Do you think it is a good idea if I find students from another country and a small group of you establish a joint blog?
   ____ A. Yes, it is a good idea.
   ____ B. No, it is not a good idea.
   Why? ________________________________________________________
   ____ C. No opinion.

14. When you wrote an article on your blog, did you look up an English dictionary or ask someone else when you didn’t know how to express your idea in English?
   ____ A. Yes, I did.
   ____ B. No, I didn’t.
   Why? ________________________________________________________

15. Please write down any opinions about using blog in English class.
   _____________________________________________________________________