Blogs for Writing Instruction

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Abstract

Based on previous research that demonstrated the affective response of students to blogs in the foreign language classroom (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Ducate & Lumicka, 2008; Sun, 2010) and a preference over traditional writing assignments (Lee, 2010), the author has been using blogs in his EFL classes in Japan since 2007. In this paper, the author reports on four versions of the blog assignment with the latest iteration being a tandem blog project with an American public university. The students involved in the project enjoyed having the opportunity to hone their writing skills while engaged in authentic communication with native speakers of English. Despite some shortcomings, tandem blogs can be an excellent alternative to traditional writing assignments.

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Introduction

Of the language skills, it can be argued that writing is the most difficult one of the four to be mastered. Unlike listening and speaking which one naturally acquires in their first language, reading and writing are skills which require instruction. Of these two skills, writing is the more challenging because it is productive rather than receptive in nature. In the case of a learner of a second or foreign language, the amount of effort and time involved in becoming a proficient writer is dramatically increased because of the necessity to not only acquire grammar and vocabulary knowledge but also an understanding of features such as genre and register.

In the 2007 academic year, I was faced with the task of teaching general English to approximately 200 engineering students. Because the course was held once a week (90-minute class), it was even more challenging due to the limited number of classroom hours. Instead of focusing on one or two of the language skills at the expense of the others, I tried to address all of them in the course. Naturally, this is rather difficult if not impossible so I looked for a solution which did not require classroom time. In other words, I looked for something that could be assigned as ongoing homework. Because my students seemed to

enjoy using computers and the Internet, I became interested in the use of blogs for writing instruction and practice.

Literature Review

Researchers have long been interested in the benefits of using computers for language learning. Warschauer (1996) identified three motivating factors for language learners: communication, learner empowerment, and learning. Warschauer described the motivating aspects of communication as "feeling part of a community, developing thoughts and ideas, learning about different people and cultures, and students' learning from each other" (1996, p. 9). In terms of empowerment, Warschaur explains that students are empowered when isolation is reduced and interactions with others are facilitated. The use of computers for language language provides learners "more control of their learning and more opportunities to practice English" (Warschauer, 1996, p. 9). For these reasons, he found that his students thought that computers improved efficiency and helped them become more autonomous. More recently, Chartrand (2008) reported similar findings with Japanese English as Foreign Language learners. He found that both high school and university students enjoyed computer-based learning and they thought that the use of computers was effective for English study.

Researchers have also investigated the use of blogs in the foreign language classroom. They reported have reported that blogs can promote students' interest and motivation to use English (Ward, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Iida, 2009). Also, students have a positive overall impression of blogs (Armstrong & Retterer 2008; Ducate & Lumicka 2008; Sun 2010) and a preference over traditional writing assignments (Lee, 2010).

When compared with traditional writing assignments, blogs are more effective (Rezaee & Oladi, 2008; Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010). Wei (2010) reported that her students thought that they had more control over the writing process when writing on their blogs. In more specific terms, Fellner and Apple (2006) observed an improvement in the writing

fluency of their students as a result of writing daily blog entries. Also, Lee (2010) found improved content organization, vocabulary, and idea development in her students' writing. In addition to improving writing skills, reading skills also improved (Ducate et al. 2008). Also, additional benefits were reported such as improved social interaction skills (Rezaee & Oladi, 2008), increased confidence (Armstrong et al. 2008), and increased levels of autonomy (Iida, 2009).

Version 1 (2007)

In the 2007-2008 academic year, I implemented blogs as a homework assignment for my engineering students. This assignment, which accounted for 10% of the final course grade, required the students to do the following: write one blog posting each week (each posting more than 50 words in length), and to write a total of 20 comments on the postings of their classmates throughout the semester. Other than the class time which was used to initially explain the assignment to the students, this assignment was done entirely outside of the classroom. One positive outcome of the assignment was authentic communication between classmates using English. Extract 1 shows a student's blog posting and comments from his classmates. Even though the writer failed to write the required 50 words and made numerous grammatical mistakes, a brief dialogue occurred between him and three of his classmates.

Extract 1. Blog posting and comments from classmates (Stout & Murray, 2008)

Volleyball
I watched volleyball game on TV.
A Japan were playing a Bulgaria.
It was very exciting game.
The result of this game a Bulgaria won.
I want to a Japan win next game.

Reader A: Male volleyball is interesting.
Reader B: Me too! Hold out Japan!!
Reader C: I don't like volleyball program, because my favorite program is collapse.

Unfortunately, the majority of the students failed to meet the requirements of the assignment because they did not write the required number of blog postings and comments. Despite the

shortcomings of the project, I decided to continue improving the blog assignment for the next academic year.

Version 2 (2008-2010)

Based on my observations and comments from the students, the blog assignment was revised for the 2008-2009 academic year. The most important changes were increasing the value of assignment from 10% to 20% of the final course grade and allocating some classroom time to the assignment. These changes were made because more classroom time was available (2 weekly 90-minute classes) and the course was a two-skills course (reading & writing) instead of a general one. I hoped that these changes would make the implementation smoother and make it less likely for students to abandon their blogs partway through the semester.

At the end of the semester, the students completed an anonymous questionnaire about the blog assignment that focused on three aspects: a) ease of use, b) an outlet for communication, and c) a tool for learning. Some of the important findings were: students experienced difficulty writing blog postings at the beginning, they preferred to read their classmates' blogs rather than writing on their own blogs, and they believed that they had learning something new (Murray, 2009).

Version 3 (2010-2012)

In the third iteration, I made a few subtle changes to the assignment by increasing the workload and class time involved with the blogs. Specifically, these changes were as follows: 12 blog postings, 25% of the final course grade, suggested minimum posting length of 75 words, 30 minutes of class time per week, and blog topics were assigned. Of these changes, the most important one was the use of topics. In the previous versions of the assignment, the only assigned topic was the initial posting, *Self-Introduction*. However, some students in previous years had expressed frustration in thinking of interesting topics for their blogs. For

this reason, 9 of the 12 required postings had assigned topics such as *My Favorite Movie* and *Summer Vacation*.

At the end of the semester, the students completed a revised version of the anonymous questionnaire used for Version 2 (Murray, 2011). In terms of blogs as a language-learning tool, the students thought that they learned new vocabulary and their reading and writing skills had improved. Also, the students preferred topics about their daily lives which did not require many personal details. Figure 1 is a screenshot of a student's blog from the spring semester of 2010. The student has customized the appearance of her blog with a custom wallpaper and avatar. Her blog posting is more than the suggested 75 words and the contents are meaningful. Also, there are five comments from her classmates.

Figure 1: Sample of student blog

Unfortunately, the comments from her classmates were not as meaningful as the blog posting. Figure 2 is a snapshot of these comments. Although the commenters refer to the contents of the blog posting, there is little substance to the blog comments. Commenter 1 (Massoi) agrees that getting a new family pet is exciting and commenter 2 (Harisen) mentions that Chinatown in Yokohama is nice place to visit. However, commenter 3 (unknown) makes a seemingly off-topic comment about visiting Okinawa.

Figure 2: Sample student comments

Version 4 (2012-2013)

For the fourth iteration of the assignment, I was looking for a way to rely on intrinsic motivation (authentic communication) rather than extrinsic motivation (course grade). Also, I wanted to find a way to nurture meaningful communication between the students. For these reasons, I made several changes to the assignment requirements. First, instead of accounting for 25% of the final course grade, the value of the assignment was reduced to 20%. Second, the students were required to reply to comments written by the readers of their blogs. In the past, it was mostly one-way communication from the writer to his audience because the majority of the writers did not respond to comments. By requiring the students to post at least one reply to their commenters, I had hoped that comments would be a way to facilitate meaningful two-way communication between the writer and the commenters. The third and most important change was setting up a tandem learning project with students from another university.

The tandem learning project involved my students (20 Japanese English as a Foreign Language students) and 5 Japanese as a Foreign Language students at a public university in the United States. My students were required to participate in the project because it was a part of

their coursework. However, in the case of the American students, their participation was totally voluntary. Because the language abilities between the two groups of students were markedly different, both teachers recommended to their students that comments were written in the same language as the posting. In other words, the American students wrote English comments on the Japanese students' blogs and the Japanese students wrote Japanese comments on the American students' blogs.

Figure 3 is a screenshot from one of the Japanese student's blogs. Despite being warned about Internet safety, this student divulged personal information such as his full name, birthday, and hometown. Fortunately, the blog system was password protected and could not be accessed by the general public. On the positive side, the first comment on the student's blog was written by one of the American students. Because the students were interested in communicating with each other, the comments were meaningful and encouraged responses. In the case of commenter 1 (Richarty), he asked a very specific question (about video games called *Pokemon Black 2* & *Pokemon White 2*) and gave an unsolicited opinion about other video games (*Pokemon Black* & *Pokemon White*). Also, the comment was very timely because it was written less than one hour after the blog entry was posted.

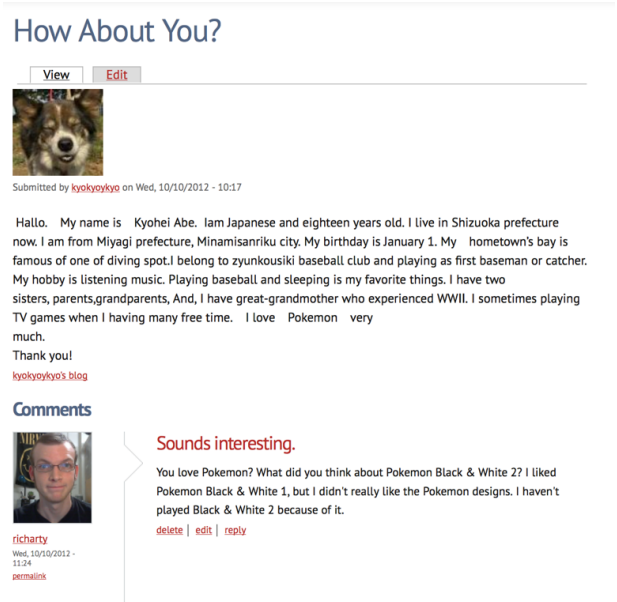

Figure 3: Japanese student's blog posting with foreign student's comment

Even more encouraging was the genuine communication between the writer and the commenter. As shown in Figure 4, the writer (Kyokyoykyo) responded to commenter's opinion (Richarty) and the conversation continued. Also, a second commenter (X-1219) joined the conversation asking about their favorite *Pokemon* characters and telling his.

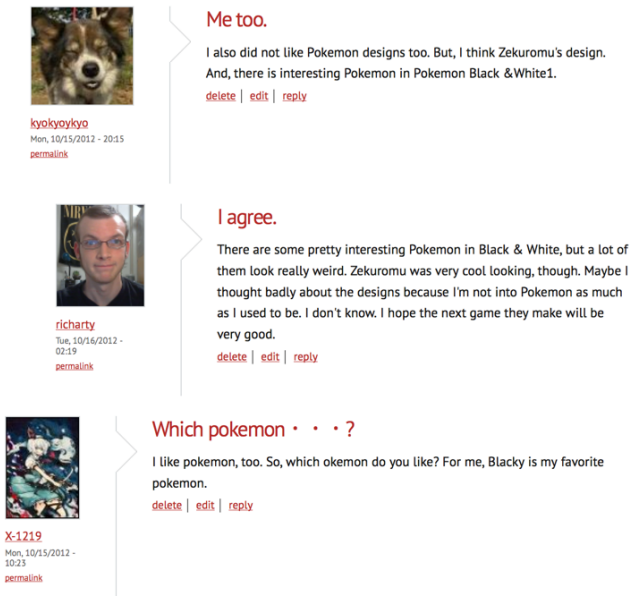

Figure 4: Communication between Japanese writer and readers

In the case of the Japanese as Foreign Language learners, the learners in the United States wrote their blog postings in Japanese. Figure 5 is the self-introduction written by one of the American students. As a beginner of the Japanese language, the majority of the text is written in hiragana, with the exception of one kanji. Also, the writer does not know the Japanese equivalent of "language requirements" so it is written in English.

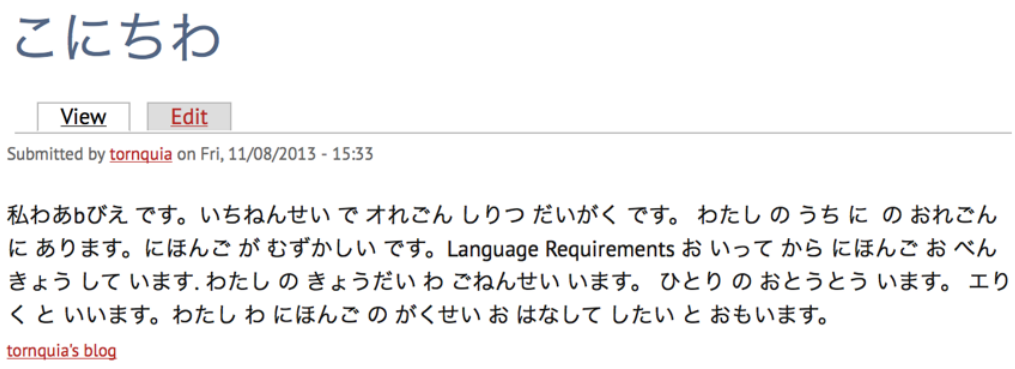

Figure 5: American student's blog posting

Something unexpected occurred in the comments section of the blogs written in Japanese. As shown in Figure 6, the comment written by an American (Murrown) was totally in Japanese. However, both of the comments written by the Japanese students (Chomiri, Hamakumanomi) were bilingual (Japanese followed by English). In the case of the second Japanese commenter (Hamakumanomi), spaces were added between the words to make the comment easier for the learners of Japanese to understand. So, students took some advantage of affordances offered by the technology of the blog format and computer screens to aid in communication.

Figure 6: Comments written in Japanese

Observations and Suggestions

From what I observed and the comments I heard from my students, it was evident that they enjoyed interacting with the American students. The discussion threads in which the American students commented were much more active than those with only Japanese participants. These threads not only had more participants but also more comments. It seemed

that my students preferred to interact with the American students more than their Japanese classmates. One possible reason for this is that there was a true information gap in the terms of language and knowledge between the two classes.

A second benefit of the project was the use of authentic language. In previous years, I often had to remind the students about various aspects of writing mechanics such as spelling, spacing and hard/soft carriage returns. For example, my students would write a single sentence on each line instead of writing paragraphs. Because the American students showed excellent examples of natural writing, I was not the only source of instruction. Generally speaking, the American students provided examples of comments. These comments encouraged ongoing discussion through questions, and sharing opinions and preferences. As the semester progressed, my students began to emulate the writing of the American students.

However, there were a few shortcomings of the tandem project. Because the academic years of Japanese and American universities are different, timing can be difficult. For this reason, it was only feasible to run this project in the fall semester. Unfortunately, the American students were very active at the beginning (October and November) but became less active as the semester progressed. Possible causes for this were final examinations and a relatively long winter vacation. Naturally, this problem could be alleviated by making the project required for all students.

Future directions

The biggest possible change going forward would be to implement the project on an existing social media platform such as Facebook. Because so many students are already Facebook users, little instruction on how to use the system would be required. Such a move would make the project much more convenient for both the teachers and students. Also, it would be easier to involve more institutions.

Another possible change would be to integrate class assignments into the blog assignment instead of being standalone assignment. For example, a task requiring the Japanese students to get information from the American students could be added. Similarly, the American students could have tasks that require interaction with the Japanese students.

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