

MODERN TRENDS IN TEACHING METHODS OF LANGUAGES

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RESTRUCTURING CLASSROOM INTERACTION: VOICE BLOGS IN ESL TEACHING AT HIGHER SCHOOLS

РЕСТРУКТУРИЗАЦІЯ ВЗАЄМОДІЇ В КЛАСІ: ГОЛОСОВІ БЛОГИ У ВИКЛАДАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО СПРЯМУВАННЯ У ЗАКЛАДАХ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ

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One common difficulty that ESL learners encounter is a severe lack of opportunities to put the language knowledge they have acquired into practice in authentic environments. For most ESL students, speaking practice is usually limited to a conversation course. However, owing to large class sizes and limited class time, learners tend to have few opportunities to practice speaking. The availability of blogs has created additional opportunities for oral practice.

This paper considers voice blogs as a platform for an extensive study of EFL learners' speaking skills. The purpose is to present the ways of integrating blogs into ESL teaching and examine the effect the blogs have on ESL learning process and learning strategies, and the students' perception of the learning experiences afforded by blogs.

According to Hubbard, computer-mediated communication (CMC) typically involves two dimensions: time (synchronous or asynchronous) and modality (textual or spoken) [5, p. 47]. The text-based CMC involves email, online discussion forums, online chat rooms, and other texts on the Internet,

whereas the spoken form includes voicemail and email with attached voice recordings [8, p. 207]. Different researches have shown that CMC motivates learners to engage in meaningful communication in the target language and leads to effective language learning [1; 2; 3; 6; 8]. It allows ESL learners to take control of learning content and learning process.

Studies indicate that a well-designed CMC activity can encourage students to notice and modify output content and structure, enhance motivation, reduce anxiety, foster learner autonomy, and promote cooperative learning [1; 2; 4; 5]. Furthermore, by reducing social-context clues such as gender, race, and status, and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, CMC provides a safer and more relaxed environment for language learners, especially for the shy or less confident ones. CMC also enables individuals to express their thoughts at their own pace and in their own space so that, in contrast to traditional classroom settings, CMC learners do not have to compete with their classmates for the instructor's attention.

One of the best-received features of the Web 2.0 era is blogging. Blogs, also called weblogs, have fundamentally changed the way people use and interact on the Internet, by changing users from consumers to contributors of information. Blogs are easily created and easily updateable Web sites that enable authors with no knowledge of HTML to become instant publishers on the Internet. While traditional Web sites that feature hyperlinks and reflect the Web site developers' content-related priorities and usually contain a static, limited scope of content, blogs with Really Simple Syndication (RSS) present readers with diverse ideas, questions, and links and, thereby, help develop collective intelligence [7; 9].

Blogs have been well received in education owing to their multimedia features, interactivity, and ability to support cooperative and autonomous learning. The strong interconnectedness between bloggers and readers makes blogs a powerful tool for global conversation. Bloggers can read other blogs, link to them, and reference them in their own blogs. The worldwide blog audience enables students to interact with and have their work viewed by others outside the classroom [4; 8; 9].

Several studies have lent support to the assertion that blogs can effectively facilitate language teaching and learning [2; 4; 7], especially in terms of learners' language complexity, grammatical correctness, and fluency [6]. In addition, bloggers tend to have a greater sense of freedom to express their ideas and to make their arguments than do classroom-based participants [1; 2]. According to Baggetun and Watson, blogs enhance users' exposure to other people of different backgrounds and circumstances

[1, p. 458]. The archiving of blog entries facilitates users' reflection on blog content and fosters development of metacognitive strategies for monitoring the progress of learning on the blog [7, p. 16]. Through blogging, students take ownership of the virtual space and the work they publish – an outcome that replaces traditional acts of passive information consumption by acts of active information creation [9, p. 134].

According to different scholars, ESL learners perceive blogging not only as a means of learning, but also as a means of self-presentation, information exchange, and social networking. Furthermore, blogs constitute a dynamic forum that fosters extensive practice, learning motivation, authorship, and development of learning strategies.

A possible explanation for students' perception of improvement, whether real or imagined, especially in fluency, is that the blog's speaking environment, where freedom and safety were paramount, encourage students to take risks with the target language and to emphasize content over form, which resulted in a sense of improved fluency. In addition, the task-based nature of blogging promotes authentic and purposeful language use, with the form playing a secondary role. This also aids students' fluency development.

Students in language courses would be more likely to engage in blogging if they felt that maintaining a regular target language blog could enhance their language proficiency or that improved blog-based performance could improve their course grade. Whatever the case, educators should make informed decisions regarding the extent of integration of blogs with course content. Course design should take into account many blog-related issues. One such issue concerns whether teachers should assign specific topics to be addressed on blogs. Further research in this regard would be of interest to researchers and classroom teachers.

Finding a balance between meaning and form is another important issue in integrating blogs more fully into course content. The need to focus on form may vary depending on course objectives and task design. If the main purpose of blogging is to enhance self-confidence (that is, to reduce speaking anxiety), then educators should provide students with opportunities for free language exchanges. On the other hand, if the main purpose of blogging is to enhance awareness of form, teachers should encourage students to observe and to reflect on language use in their own and in others' blogs.

One of the limitations of the current study is that classroom-based blogging tends to have a limited audience. Future research could compare classroom-based blogging and 'real-world' blogging and examine its effect on language learning, learner attitudes, and interaction among bloggers.

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