

*The Practice and Effects of Using Weblogs to Motivate EFL Non-English Majors to
Read and Write in English Online*

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1. Introduction

The remarkable advances in computer and online technologies have revolutionized the way people read and write, and thus a lot of attention has been paid to how these new technologies have influenced or brought new challenges and possibilities to second or foreign language learning and teaching. Since paper-based materials are not the sole source of information anymore in the digital age, and more and more students are dependent on computer-based resources or even addicted to the Internet, language teachers have to cope with this change and help learners explore and benefit from the learning opportunities offered by Internet-mediated resources and innovations. As a Taiwanese English teacher teaching language courses for undergraduate students of non-English major for nearly ten years, I have been trying hard to deal with these students' reluctance to read or write in English out of class and worried about their Internet obsession or addiction that could easily hinder them from concentrating in class. Last year, an unusual silence during a ten-minute break caught my attention, and then I realized that it was because we were having the class in a computer lab and every student was busy using the Internet. After the break, I could not help but ask them how much time they usually spent on the Internet every day, and half of them admitted that they spent at least five hours a day online doing things such as facebooking, blogging, reading online news or magazine articles, checking and replying emails, watching videos, playing games, exchanging instant messages via MSN or chatting with friends on Skype. However, when I asked whether they did any of these in English, only few of them said if they were not too busy, they might read some celebrity or fashion news on English websites, but none of them had tried writing anything in English on the Internet. The results of this informal class survey made me wonder whether it would be possible to combine English reading and writing with computer-based resources and make these heavy Internet users feel like doing more online reading and writing in English.

After careful thought and consideration, I found that blogs (or weblogs), often defined or referred to as easy-to-create and easy-to-maintain online personal journals, might be used to create authentic and interesting web-based environments where the students could read and write in the target language at their own pace. To ensure greater success, a blog-assisted reading-to-write and writing-to-be-read project was designed for and incorporated into my 18-week *Advanced University English* curriculum. This paper reports on the approach and outcome of using this blog project with Taiwanese students of non-English major and explores the efficiency of using blogs in the EFL context to motivate these students to read and write in English on the

Internet by means of the empirical findings of a small-scale mixed methods study.

2. Blogs and Language Learning

Blogs have been gaining popularity since free blog hosting services such as *Blogger.com* appeared in 1999 (Pinkman, 2005), and such rapid growth in the number of bloggers and blog sites, as Kavaliauskienė, Anusienė, and Mažeikienė expound, results from the following features of blogs (2006, p.169):

Blogging does not require any knowledge of HTML. Blog entries are usually followed by a comment button, allowing readers to write a response....Blogs are easily linked and cross-linked to create larger on-line communities....Weblog entries are made by typing directly into the browser and with the click of a button are instantly published on the Internet.

It is clear that the quickness, easiness and interactive nature of blogging, together with the availability of free blog accounts on the Internet, have made blogs become more and more popular virtual communicative environments that have great potential for supporting and promoting language learning beyond the classroom.

Blogs have been seen or used as a pedagogical or learning tool and attracted considerable research interest in the field of language education (Pinkman, 2005). Campbell (2003) describes three types of blogs that can be used with ESL classes: the tutor blog that allows the tutor to provide course information, texts, exercises, or links to English websites; the learner blog that is run by each student not only as a personal online journal to write about whatever interests him or her and exchange ideas with other people using a comment button but also as an e-portfolio of their written work to show their language development over time; the class blog where the tutor and the learners can share and discuss messages, images and links related to the classroom discussion topics. Some or all of these blog types have been adopted or modified by the other blog-related studies, most of which research into the effects of applying blogs in writing classes (e.g. Johnson, 2004; Ward, 2004; Tseng, 2008; Zhang, 2009; Hashemi & Najafi, 2011), and a few of which investigate how blogging could encourage learner independence outside the classroom (e.g. Pinkman, 2005), raise learners' language awareness and development (e.g. Kavaliauskienė, Anusienė, & Mažeikienė, 2006), or promote EFL interaction, self-expression, and self-evaluation (e.g. Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011). However, as Zhang points out, the use of blogs as an educational tool is still novel, so more empirical studies on the topic needs to be done in order to explore the potential of applying blogging in different aspects

of EFL learning and teaching more fully and thoroughly (Zhang, 2009).

3. The Blog-assisted Project

3.1 Rationale

The primary purpose of designing this blog-assisted reading-to-write, writing-to-be read project and using it with my students of non-English majors was to encourage them to do more out-of-class English reading and writing on the Internet. More specifically, this project aimed to motivate the target students to read online materials extensively on their own and then share their responses to what they read by writing and posting a reading report on their own blogs, which would be read and commented on by their group mates. It was believed that the tutor blog could serve as a virtual library offering students the freedom of choosing what to read among a number of literary and non-literary online texts with a wide variety of topics and subjects, and that the learner blog would provide them with a personal online space where they could express themselves freely in written English and exchange opinions with real-life audience through online asynchronous communication. More importantly, it was hoped that the implementation of this blog project in the university English curriculum would help the students improve their English reading and writing in a new, interesting and motivating way and make it more likely for them to become active and autonomous readers and writers of English.

3.2 Procedure

This project was implemented in my 18-week *Advanced University English* course taken by 40 first-year Taiwanese undergraduates of non-English major. According to the results of their university entrance English exam, these EFL students were categorized by the university as upper-intermediate or intermediate learners of English and were thus allowed to take this advanced-level English class. Prior to the implementation of the project, two hundred electronic, HTML-based English texts collected from free news, magazine, and literature websites were posted on the tutor blog on *Blogger.com*. In the first class gathering, a questionnaire survey was conducted to investigate the students' attitude toward and experience of reading and writing in English online as well as using blogs, and the results were used to modify the blog project. In the second week, the project was introduced to the students, and the tutor blog as well as a sample learner blog created by my teaching assistant was also shown to them. Then the students were asked to create their own learner blogs on

Blogger.com following my and the free blog provider's step-by-step instructions. When all was completed, their blog addresses were collected by my teaching assistant and emailed to every one in the class.

In the third week, the students were divided into eight groups of five and then instructed to follow the reading-to-write, writing-to-be-read schedule in the fourth week. That is, they had to choose one text on the tutor blog to read and post a reading report with the text title, genre, level of difficulty, reading time, a summary, response or feedback to it, as well as one or two discussion questions related to the text content on their own blog in even weeks; in odd weeks, they were required to visit their group mates' blogs and write their answers to the discussion question(s) at the end of the latest blog post. All this required no classroom time, and the students' blogs were used as their e-portfolios that could be easily accessed and checked by the teacher anytime. Since there were two exam and one holiday weeks in which the students were allowed to take a break from the reading and writing cycle, they read a total of six texts on the tutor blog and wrote six reports on their own blogs at the end of the semester. When the project was completed, the students were administered an exit questionnaire in class to give their feedback or responses to the project, and they were also asked to volunteer to come for a one-to-one interview with me.

4. Research Methods, Results and Discussion

To get an in-depth understanding of how my Taiwanese students of non-English major responded to the implementation of the blog project in the English class and determine the usefulness of blogging in motivating these students to do more online reading and writing in English on their own, a mixed-method approach using multiple data sources from questionnaires, interviews and students' blog reports was conducted in this practitioner research. The quantitative data were collected by means of pre-course and post-course questionnaire surveys as well as their blog reports while the qualitative data came from both the blog reports and my one-on-one student interviews. It should be noted here that the analysis and discussion would draw on and integrate both types of data, but greater priority would be given to the qualitative data, for the study needed qualitative depth to explore the students' views and perceptions regarding the practice and effects of the blog project.

4.1 Pre-course Questionnaire

During my first meeting with the class, a pre-course questionnaire survey was used to

help me know more about the students' prior knowledge, experiences, perspectives, and attitudes related to reading and writing on the Internet and blogging. The results of the survey revealed that few of them had the habit of reading or writing in English outside the English classroom or on the Internet; most of them had the experience of blogging (half of them had their own Chinese blogs) and liked the idea of integrating it with the English class. Moreover, a majority of them took a positive attitude toward reading authentic online texts in English, but some of them were worried that it might be a difficult and time-consuming learning task for them, which made me give up the original idea of asking them to read two texts on the tutor blog each week. On the other hand, when asked what sorts of reading topics interested them the most, these students preferred to read non-literary texts about sports, technology, science, fashion, entertainment and health as well as literary texts in the categories of adventure and fairy tales. These responses made me decide to replace some texts on the tutor blog with those related to the topics that would be more interesting to them.

4.2 Post-course Questionnaire

At the end of the semester, the students were administered a post-course questionnaire concerning their personal feedback or responses to this learning experience, especially their perceptions of the effects of this blog project on their motivation to read and write in English on the Internet. Overall, the students responded very positively to the use of this project in the English class, and the results of the questionnaire can be presented and discussed under the three categories: positive, negative and others.

Positive results included: 1) the majority of the respondents enjoyed reading the authentic English texts on the tutor blog; 2) most of them liked reading these English texts online more than reading them in the paper form; 3) although most of them preferred to read non-literary texts (news reports and magazine articles), all of them read at least one literary text (short stories and one or two novel chapters); 4) the majority felt that their attitude toward reading in English became more positive, that they had more confidence of reading authentic English texts online on their own, and that they became more patient when dealing with longer English texts; 5) almost all of them agreed that this learning experience had helped them know more English websites, increase their interest in reading extensively in English online, read in English more frequently, improved their English reading skills and speed, and become more capable of expressing their responses to an English text in written English; 6) some of them admitted that knowing their group mates would read and comment on their blog posts gave them stronger motivation to write well and express themselves

clearly.

There were also some negative results, including: 1) most of the students admitted that they would give up reading a text that interested them if they found it too long or too difficult; 2) many of them felt that reading six texts and writing six blog posts in one semester was too much; 3) the majority admitted that they tried to complete the learning tasks of this project mainly because they wanted to get better final grades; 4) only a few of them believed that they would continue to read the texts on the tutor blog or write more on their own blogs after the project was completed. Other important findings include: 1) they chose a text to read mainly because they were interested in its topic and wanted to know more about it; 2) it was not difficult for them to find something interesting to read on the tutor blog; 3) the majority liked the way blogging was integrated into the project, the way the blog project was incorporated into this University English course and the way their blogs were used as their e-portfolios of their reading assignments.

4.3 Interviews

In addition to the questionnaire quantitative data, the interview qualitative data were collected and used to “add meaning to numbers” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 45). A list of guiding questions were prepared to make sure what came out of the interviewees could help probe the research focus of the study, but extensive follow-up questions that were not on the list were still asked in response to the interviewees' answers. 20 out of 40 students volunteered to be interviewed and tell me what they thought about this blog project in person. Each one-on-one semi-structured interview was held at my office and took about 30 to 40 minutes. The interviewees were allowed to speak in Chinese, so none of them chose to use to answer my questions in English. All the interviews were recorded using an MP3 player so that I could “attend to the direction rather than the detail” during the interview, and “listen intently” to the answers afterwards (Bassegy, 1999, p. 81). After each interview, however, I needed to get it transcribed from the digital sound recording, and then had the Chinese transcripts translated into English for research purposes.

Most of the findings from the interview data were in accordance with those from the questionnaires or offered supportive details to help explain some of the questionnaire results. For example, the questionnaire data showed that many of them did not like non-literary texts more than literary ones, but during the interviews, they explained that they preferred to read more news reports or magazine articles because those were

much shorter than short stories or a chapter of a novel. Another example was that a few of them complained that the writing part of the project was too time-consuming, and that was why they felt that doing six reading-to-write, writing-to-be-read cycles in one semester was too much for them as non-English majors. However, several interviewees said that they usually read more than one text on the tutor blog (one of them always read six or seven) and then chose the one that they found easier or easiest to make comments on to write their blog posts.

It is also worth noting that all the interviewees agreed that they valued and appreciated the opportunities of doing online reading and writing in English outside the classroom created by the blog project, and they all believed that this learning experience had helped them improve their English ability in one way or another, but many of them made it clear that they would not continue to do this after the class ended because they still regarded it as a kind of reading/writing assignment or because they did not think anyone would read and comment on what they wrote on their blogs.

4.4 Blog Reports

The students were required to complete and submit a blog report giving information such as why they chose the reading text, which genre it belonged to, which topic it was about, how much time they used to read it, how difficult they found it was, and how much they enjoyed reading it. These blog reports provided both quantitative and qualitative data. The results of the quantitative data showed that the most popular genre was the news report, the most commonly read topic was health, the most frequently labeled level of difficulty (from 1 to 5) was 3, and most of the reading was done within 30 minutes. The findings from the qualitative data revealed that the most frequently-used reasons for text choice were that the topic was interesting and the text was short, which agrees with the results of the questionnaire and interview data.

5. Conclusion

The poor English ability of university graduates or graduate students has been the major concern of many university educators in Taiwan. Living in the EFL environment and majoring in other subjects, these non-English majors do not have much chance or motivation to learn and use the target language in their daily lives, except in the once-a-week English class in the freshman year. Thus, although they were forced to memorize a lot of English vocabulary and grammatical concepts in secondary schools, it is very likely that they might forget everything more quickly than they can imagine if they do not keep using and learning the target language outside the English classroom. This blog project was designed for these Taiwanese students of non-English major, aiming to use the charm and unique functions of blogging technology to motivate them to do more English reading and writing on their own. As Arnold (2009) points out, the Internet is a free and valuable source of material for foreign language learning, and should also be used for communication and independent learning in today's world.

The major findings from both qualitative and quantitative data of the current study show that the students' responses to the project were generally positive and that the blog project was especially effective in motivating these students to read extensively in English on the Internet and to write well on their blogs for their readers/group mates. There was also evidence that the implementation of this project had increased their ability and confidence in tackling authentic English texts on their own and in expressing themselves in written English. Although this project was carried out for only 12 weeks of one semester, and not many of them agreed that they had formed the habit of doing online English reading and writing out of class or felt like continuing to use the blogs to read and write in English after the project was completed, it is believed that even these negative findings can still provide significant pedagogical implications for future use of weblogs in ELT. This study intends to encourage more language teachers to incorporate blogs into their own teaching and inspire more researchers to further explore and determine the usefulness of blogging in language education.

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