Blogging in the L2 Classroom:

Effects on Student Motivation, Identity and Community Building, and Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Technology in its many forms is widely accepted as a useful pedagogical tool in the acquisition of language. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) in particular is increasingly viewed as an effective means of increasing learner motivation, promoting the development of language skills, and encouraging the formation of learners’ sense of community and identity. One increasingly popular variety of CMC is the blog. Presented here is an overview of current research and perspectives on the creative and effective use of blogs in the L2 classroom. Also presented are potential issues in the implementation of blogs.

*Keywords:* blogs, audio blogs, English as a second/foreign language, educational technology, learner motivation, community-building
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Introduction

In 1991, just prior to the public unveiling of the World Wide Web, Nina Garrett published an article in *The Modern Language Journal* that assessed current trends and issues in the use of digital technologies for the teaching and learning of foreign languages. In 2009, nearly twenty years after Garret’s seminal article, the digital landscape had dramatically changed, and in that year *The Modern Language Journal* devoted an entire issue to the topic of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In one of the issue’s articles, Levy (2009) commented that “Today’s technological environment appears to have changed beyond recognition compared to that described by Garrett” (p. 770), and some have recently noted the vast opportunities computer technology has created in regards to making learning more interactive between and among teachers and students (Yang & Chang, 2012).

The corpus of research literature devoted to exploring the uses of digital technology in language classrooms—along with the presence of scholarly journals and professional bodies devoted to the support of this exploration—is certainly a testament to the potential that digital technologies hold in supporting the acquisition of languages. Over the last couple decades, the teaching and learning of languages has been “one of the most popular and dynamic areas of education for the application of learning technologies” (Thomas, Reinders, & Warshauer, 2013, n.p.). Falling within the category of CALL are programs and devices that facilitate computer-mediated communication (CMC). These programs and devices are classified as either synchronous—meaning that communication occurs at the same time, such as in chat rooms—or
asynchronous—meaning that communication occurs in delayed time, such as it does through email or online discussion boards (Hsu, Wang & Comac, 2008).

One of the multifarious asynchronous teaching and learning tools available through the web is the blog. A blog is a web-based online environment that requires a relatively low amount of technological expertise to build and maintain (Stockwell & Tanaka-Ellis, 2012). Blogs are multimodal in that they permit users to embed textual entries along with pictures, videos, music, and links to other online destinations (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Halic, et al., 2010). For years, blogs have been a popular medium through which individuals have been able to log details about their personal lives or express their thoughts on just about any topic imaginable (Langer de Ramirez, 2010) while establishing a network of readers (Stockwell & Tanaka-Ellis, 2012). They are interactive by nature: imbedded hypertext can connect to other blogs, Web pages or resources; other media such as video or audio files may be uploaded to posts; and on most blogging websites, readers can leave their personal comments on specific posts (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Halic, et al., 2010). It is possible to create group blogs to which multiple users have the potential to post and designate content, and single-user blogs can be linked to other single-user blogs to create on-line communities. RSS feeds—which stands for “really simple syndication”—enable bloggers to easily alert subscribers to new postings (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Some have suggested that the chronological viewing nature of blogs is a limitation (Godwin-Jones, 2003), however it is possible to create categorical archives by attaching topic or category labels to any posting; these archives are typically organized in a side-bar, and clicking on any one of them causes all posts with that label to appear together in a new page (Langer de Ramirez, 2010).

While many blogs are personal or journalistic, interest in using blogs in education has blossomed in recent years, and a significant amount of research has centered on the pedagogical
applications of blogging (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Yang & Chang, 2012). Blogs can be used in a multitude of ways across a wide range of teaching contexts, and their popularity among young people makes them an appealing option for educators who are searching for ways in which to incorporate CMC tools into their courses (Halic, et al. 2010). Langer de Ramirez (2010) lists just a short selection of possible uses in the bilingual classroom: as a place to host class debates or group book discussions; to store creative writing collections, novel or story reviews; for commenting on class discussion or content questions; for responding to other media; or, for simply writing journals. Blogs can function as digital portfolios of student work in a variety of modalities, and they can be used to facilitate personal reflection or group interaction (Yang & Chang, 2012). Blogs are favored by teachers because of their relative ease of use, the fast and easy nature of publishing, and their ability to allow students to write to a real audience, thus encouraging student-to-student and student-to-teacher communication (Hsu, Wang & Comac, 2008; Stockwell & Tanaka-Ellis, 2012; Sun, 2010).

As mentioned above, the pedagogical applications of CALL and CMC have been extensively explored in general education research (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012). Research in relation to the blog’s use in the language classroom has been relatively limited in comparison (Hsu, Wang & Comac, 2008), however, the research that does exist suggests a host of benefits of using blogs in the L2 classroom. The present paper provides an overview of current research and emerging perspectives on the potential of blogging activities in increasing learner motivation, in encouraging the development of learners’ sense of community and identity, and in enabling learners’ language development.
Student Motivation & Perceptions of CALL

In second language acquisition research, motivation refers to the conative element of striving for and sustaining L2 learning (Ortega, 2009), and it is widely accepted as a crucial element in “the sustained process of mastering a second language” (Dörnyei, 2006, p. 50). Research in this area has undergone several paradigm shifts, moving steadily away from Gardner and Lambert’s socio-educational model to first cognitive-situated, then process-oriented, and now socio-dynamic models, such as Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2006; Rubrecht & Ishikawa, 2012). Recent research on L2 motivation places greater importance on the classroom environment that previous research, and can be characterized as a situational approach (Dörnyei, 2006). Within this approach, motivation is studied in relation to the immediate, micro-context of the classroom, and includes elements like the curriculum, the teacher, and instructional methods (Dörnyei, 2006; Ortega, 2009). This context is believed to directly influence learners’ dispositions and, in turn, learning processes and outcomes (Dörnyei, 2006).

Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (SDT)—which emphasizes the quality of motivation while taking into account “important sources of motivational influence that stem from the instructional micro-context of the classroom” (Ortega, 2009, p. 175), has been applied to second language acquisition in recent years (Vansteenkiste & Lens, 2006). This research has inquired into the role of the classroom environment on student perceptions of control and autonomy, and the effects of those perceptions on motivation (Vansteenkiste & Lens, 2006; Ortega, 2009). From this research has stemmed the idea that “when individuals engage in behavior that they understand as self-initiated by choice and largely sustained by inherent enjoyment in the activity…they are said to be intrinsically motivated” (Ortega, 2009, p. 176).
Many times, learners are extrinsically motivated to learn a second language, or motivated by factors such as professional or academic expectations and requirements. These extrinsic motivators can serve to deplete feelings of self-causation and autonomy in learners, which can consequently attenuate motivation (Ortega, 2009). As it relates to using technology in the classroom, Levy (2009) quotes Conole as noting that “students appear to place greater value on technologies they have ‘discovered’ or selected for themselves. Ownership, personalization and appropriation of technologies are overarching themes that emerge from the data” (p. 778). Research has been conducted exploring aspects of an autonomy-supportive context versus controlling contexts (Vansteenkiste & Lens, 2006). Langer de Ramirez (2010) asserts that the utilization of blogs in the L2 classroom satisfies the need for feelings of autonomy proposed by SDT. Traditional course management tools like Blackboard “are built in highly centralized environments” (Kang, Bonk & Kim, 2011) that do not necessarily engender student perceptions of choice and autonomy; blogs, on the other hand, can be individualized and self-regulated to a high degree, thus creating the autonomy-supportive context deemed so crucial by the tenets of SDT. In Ducate and Lomicka’s (2008) blog-readers-to-blog-writers project, during the reading stage, students were able to choose which blog they would like to follow throughout the semester. The authors suggested that by allowing students the choice of which blog to follow, motivation would increase and a sense of ownership toward the reading tasks could be created.

Blogs can also provide motivation for ELs as they provide students with an authentic audience for their work (Godwin-Jones, 2003). As Langer de Ramirez (2010) notes, “Too often, we ask students to write simply for the sake of writing or to yield a grade for a particular class” (p. 18). Anne Davis, a fifth-grade teacher in Conyers, Georgia, reported that because they realized that people from all over the world would potentially read their blogs, her students were
more motivated to post and respond to those commenting on their posts (Langer de Ramirez, 2010). In addition to the public quality of blogging, the permanency of a blog can also provide students with motivation to produce quality work (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Lee, 2009; Langer de Ramirez, 2010). Because posts are stored, students can look back on what they have written, and they and their teachers can easily see the progress they have made in their writing.

**Community-Building**

Matsuda (2003) suggested that “Due to its highly public and multi-modal nature, the Web is an ideal writing medium for students to explore and develop their evolving relationship to their community, culture, and world (p. 164). Indeed, the idea of learning as a “social enterprise” has been supported by learning psychologists and educators for several decades now (Kang, Bonk & Kim, 2011, p. 229). As computers and the internet have permeated our lives, CMC has become an increasingly authentic mode of interpersonal and public communication (Sun, 2010). Research suggests that participation in cooperative, communicative learning activities like blogging can improve language achievement and bolster interaction between groups of students (Ortega, 2009; Sun, 2010; Langer de Ramirez, 2010; Lee, 2009). Kang, Bonk and Kim (2011) point out that the blogosphere presents a space in which individual and collaborative learning communities can promote student interaction and community building, and this sense of community among learners could affect students’ levels of perceived learning (Halic, et al., 2010).

Blogs can be places where students can express themselves and communicate with each other in the L2 over topics that are not traditionally covered in the classroom. One potentially useful application for university and adult learners is for students to establish a network of language learning reflection blogs. Students would first access posts on the teacher’s site that
encourage critical thinking about the process and experience of language learning, and then throughout the course, post their thoughts, reflections, personal experiences, etc. on their own sites, ideally spurring discussion, debate and critical thinking among class members. Anderson (2008) notes that these types of metacognitive activities result in student reflection and evaluation of thought processes, and could lead to students changing the way they perceive and manage their own learning. Teachers could also encourage and facilitate student discussions on language learning strategies, and in this way, students might help each other in exploring effective language learning techniques.

Additionally, blogs can facilitate global communication and cross-cultural awareness. Lee (2009) investigated “the effectiveness of combined social networking applications for an intercultural exchange between Spanish and American university students” (p. 426). Lee commented that a challenge for many students studying a foreign language in their home country is the dearth of opportunities to interact with native speakers of the target language. She therefore incorporated an intercultural-exchange between students in an American Graduate Seminar and advanced students of English at a university in Spain. Through the completion of this cultural exchange, students on both sides of the Atlantic benefited from pushed speaking and writing output, authentic reading and listening input, and a deepened awareness of the target language culture.

Students participated in several tasks (Lee, 2009). In the first, the American students wrote collaboratively with a classmate to produce an informative blog about the lives of young people around their campus and area. Their Spanish partners were then asked to comment on and provide linguistic feedback for their posts. Lee noted that as students were asked to provide each other with corrective feedback during this writing task, one of the benefits of the asynchronous
nature of the blogging activity is that it encourages a focus on form. In another task, the American students recorded and posted to their blogs podcasts in which they discussed a controversial issue; the Spanish students responded to these in a similar way. Through a third task, students conducted ethnographic interviews that served to bolster their cross-cultural awareness as well as gain awareness of their own culture (Lee, 2009).

Blogging can aid in the development of student identity, as well. Black (2006) laments that the majority of second language acquisition research “conceives of identity, if it addresses it at all, as a stable construct that exists outside of and/or that can be set in opposition to social context” (p. 171). She also reports, however, that a large amount of current research on L2 and literacy acquisition has explored the various manifestations of identity through English language learners’ literacy practices. Much research, for example, has investigated how immigrants from all over the world are utilizing “online spaces to aid in the formulation and/or continuation of their various ethnic identities and affiliations across geographic borders” (p. 171). Black also cites several studies conducted by Lam, which she proposes illustrate ways in which online spaces offer “opportunities for youth to fashion linguistic and cultural identities for themselves” (p. 172).

Black (2006) conducted an interesting case study in which she was interested in exploring how learners build identities in online spaces, how these identities change and develop, how learners use these identities to interact with others in online spaces, and the role of popular culture in the development of learner identities. She describes Tanaka Nanako, a Chinese immigrant who—through participation in online fanfiction, or “writing in which fans use media narratives and pop cultural icons as inspiration for creating their own texts” (p. 172)—was able to develop confidence in her English writing abilities, as well as establish a sense of pride in her
Japanese linguistic and ethnic identity. Black comments that while writing creatively on the fanfiction site, Nanako’s writing was not limited in theme or style by institutional requirements; she did not have to conform to any immigrant identity; and she did not have to choose any one language in which to express herself. Black reports that “Through her self-identification as an ELL, she was able to garner language-related as well as social support from readers, which in turn provided her with the impetus to continue learning and writing in English” (p. 182).

Pedagogical Applications & Learning Outcomes

Reading & Writing

Most research on the use of blogs in L2 classrooms in relation to language skills and outcomes deals with applications for the development of reading and writing skills. Levy (2009) notes that the ubiquity of the word processor in today’s learning environments has made it “one of the most widely accepted technologies for writing” (p. 772), and yet as recently as 2010, Sun commented that at that point in time, few studies had been done that empirically examined the effects of blogging on the development of students’ writing skills. In general education research, blogs have proven to be an excellent medium through which students can practice informal writing to bolster self-expression, creativity, and community building (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). Sun described the blog as “an ideal platform for extensive writing online” (2010, p. 328), pointing out specifically its capacity to improve student motivation through the potential for self-expression and authentic audiences.

Ducate and Lomicka (2008) carried out an interesting year-long study in which American foreign language students participated first as readers and then as writers of blogs. The authors hoped to change the way in which they had traditionally used student paper journals—of which they, the teacher, had been the only readers—in order to provide students with a larger audience
and, they hoped, a greater sense of purpose and opportunities for peer interaction. They were interested in investigating the steps that students progress through while reading and writing blogs, students’ reactions to the blogs, and how students’ self-expression is characterized through blogging (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). Over the course of a semester, German and French language students were asked to read native-speaker blogs with the goals of getting to know the blogger, better understanding the target culture, and collecting a variety of information about the target language. At the end of the semester, students presented to their peers the information they’d collected over the previous months.

In the following semester, the readers became the writers, setting up and maintaining their own blogs. They were expected to post at least weekly on topics related to their class readings, and each post had to include a picture or link to support their writing. These posts served as either pre- or post-reading exercises, and students were also asked to practice discourse strategies while commenting on at least two of their peers’ posts per week. The researchers reported that the project was beneficial to their students in that blogging encouraged student creativity, bolstered students’ sense of ownership over their writing, and permitted students to “experiment in the FL and express themselves in a relaxed environment” (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008, p. 24).

**Speaking and Listening**

Blogs can be successfully used to support the development of language learners’ listening and speaking skills. As Lee (2009) pointed out, “L2 learners need more opportunities to listen to authentic input and to produce meaningful output beyond that of traditional classroom settings” (p. 427). Audio blogs—a type of blog for which audio files are the primary component—are one medium through which this goal can be achieved.
Davis and McGrail (2009) describe a project implemented with a group of fifth-grade bloggers for which teacher-produced podcasts were used to assist and encourage students in the proofreading and revising of their written work. Teachers recorded themselves reading student work aloud, and then posted those audio files to each student’s blog. The goal was to enable students to hear their teachers’ reactions to their writing firsthand, thus showing them where the writing was awkward, difficult to understand, contained errors, or—conversely—enjoyable and engaging. Davis and McGrail discovered that the process of listening to a reader’s reactions to their work helped students “develop the metacognitive skills of monitoring, diagnosing, revising, and editing—skills critical for improving the quality of their writing” (p. 523). Students reported that they were “surprised to learn that their writing was not exactly as they had thought”, and others “were dismayed about their actual writing” (p. 526). The culminating activity involved students recording short podcasts with proof-revising advice for their classmates. The authors suggested that the proof-revising podcast could also be made into a peer-reviewing activity if students were asked to create the podcasts for their peers.

Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008) reported on a study in which they were interested in exploring how the speaking and listening skills of students in an Advanced English Conversation course could be improved using audio blog technology. They desired to integrate into their curriculum an easy way for students to record oral assignments outside of the classroom, for which they expected several benefits, such as the potential for individualized oral feedback from the instructor. Due to the fleeting nature and therefore limited value of instantaneous classroom feedback, the authors viewed the audio blog as a tool with which to equally evaluate and give feedback to each student. Additionally, as students uploaded their audio files to their blogs, this created for them a chronological record that they and their instructor could later reference in
order to gauge their progress. The authors also suggested that instructors could record audio or even video files of homework assignments or other listening content to aid in students’ listening comprehension.

At the beginning of the term, the authors helped students set up accounts on and then connect their blogs to Evoca, an online audio recording-playing system (Hsu, Wang & Comac, 2008). Using this program, audio files can be recorded and uploaded through a cellular phone, a computer-connected microphone, or using Skype. Once students recorded their audio file and posted it to their blog, they could “embed a virtual voice recorder on the blog to allow other readers to leave oral comments” (p. 186), thus exemplifying the interactive and communicative potential of student audio blogs. Students reported positive perceptions of the blogging activity: 88.2% of students enjoyed the interaction with their instructor that the blog facilitated, 94.1% felt that the individualized feedback aided their language learning, and 82.41% felt that the audio blog was a good language-learning tool. The instructor felt that the blog enabled quick two-way communication and assisted her ability to manage and monitor her students’ skills and progress. One of the project’s potential problems, however, was the necessary time investment on the part of the instructor: she mentioned that in a class any larger than ten students, teachers might have difficulty in properly monitoring and responding to each student’s audio posting.

**Issues & Considerations**

Technology, CMC and blogging in the ESL classroom—despite their demonstrated benefits—do not come without issues and frustrations. On a basic level, teachers and students sometimes encounter technical problems such as the failing of technological devices or servers being down, thus blocking student access to websites, and these unanticipated abilities to complete tasks can be frustrating to students and teacher alike (Erben, Ban & Castañeda 2009).
Also, it is important to remember that not all students feel comfortable using technology or desire to use technology in the classroom. Gruba and Hinkelman (2012) point out that a potentially serious problem in assessing learners through the use of digital technologies and computers is the risk that a student’s computer literacy skills might negatively affect perceptions of language proficiency. They warn that “the assessor of language might find it difficult to separate a learner’s computer literacy skills (typing, navigating screens, formatting) from an ability to … produce a coherent piece of writing in a foreign language” (p. 53). Such risks necessitate training students in the use of Web-based technologies that will be used for classroom purposes. However, because this training is something that takes time away from language instruction, and therefore something to which some teachers may be resistant (Levy, 2009).

If an instructor does decide to incorporate Web-based learning technologies into the language classroom, Langer de Ramirez points out that with younger learners (and potentially older learners), guidelines and rules are important to establish (2010). These rules can cover anything from avoiding common chat abbreviations in writing (e.g. What R U doing 2nite?), to explicitly reminding students that only respectful language is acceptable, to requiring students to obtain teacher approval before posting anything to a blog. Although this type of regulation runs slightly counter to the autonomous, student-centered nature of blogging, it is necessary in public-school settings where schools and teachers are expected to exert this kind of control (Langer de Ramirez, 2010).

Another important point to consider is that when class sizes become very large, and when students have a great deal of additional work that needs to be assessed, blogging activities can become burdensome for both students and teachers alike. In Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008), a great deal of the instructor’s time was spent in assessing and responding to students’ audio blogs,
and if the class had been any larger, the instructor would not have been able to manage the commitment while still providing thoughtful feedback to students. When incorporating interactive activities with Web-based activities (and, of course, traditional activities), instructors should be mindful of whether they are creating a level of work that is overly onerous for both them and their students.

Gruba and Hinkelman (2012) suggested that the incorporation of technology should be purposeful, and that a deep understanding of the technologies should guide the structured and systematic integration of technology into existing curriculums. In relation to blogging specifically, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) warn that “before encouraging students to explore the blogosphere, the objectives of the FL course must be examined to ensure that blogging is the best tool to help students realize their goals” (p. 24). What’s more, clear learning objectives should be established in relation to the blogging activities, and these objectives should be communicated to students in order to better facilitate the achievement of quality learning outcomes (Lee, 2009).

Garrett (2009) reminds us that technology has at times “allowed gadgetry to drive pedagogy” (p. 720). This point is brought up also by Levy (2009), who commented that, “…it is the teacher’s or learner’s understanding of what technology can accomplish that is critical in practice” (p. 777). Levy warns against the “caravan effect,” a metaphor he borrows from Kohn “in which travelers (technology enthusiasts) stop for a while to drink from the waterhole (the latest technology) until they have had their fill; then they move on to the next waterhole to drink again” (p. 779). And indeed, with a multitude of enticing CMC tools available to teachers, it is important to evaluate whether existing pedagogical practices better serve desired academic outcomes.
Discussion

As Lee (2009) pointed out, “From active knowledge creation to social networking, Web 2.0 technology is transforming the way we communicate and interact with others” (p. 426). The use of computer-mediated communication—and more specifically, blogs—in English language classrooms has been demonstrated through recent research to aid learners in the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, as well as provide students with motivation to learn, opportunities to reflect upon their language learning, and establish senses of community and identity in their learning contexts. When English language learners participate in online communication of the sort afforded by blogging, their English language skills can improve through the process of language exposure, extensive output, negotiation for meaning, and intercultural communication. Research concerning the pedagogical effectiveness and application of CMC and blogging has been extensively researched in the field of general education, and it is now beginning to flourish in the field of second language acquisition research; every year, more and more case studies of successful classroom blogging projects are showing up in the literature, and through thoughtful collaboration and reflection, these applications can aid English language learners in their identity, community, and language development.
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