# Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL): Push button publishing for the pupils

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## Abstract

This paper examines the definitions of 'weblog', explains the weblog's history and discusses how weblogs develop writing, reading and communication skills.  The positive and negative potential of weblogs for language teachers is discussed, the use of weblogs in a writing class for non-native English speakers in the first year of university study is demonstrated, and feedback from these students is considered.

## What is a Weblog?

For the non-native speaker, the invitation to read and write more in English is usually as welcome as a long-distance telephone bill.  However with the advent of push-button publishing, in the shape of the weblog, language teachers now have a new way to entice students to communicate through their reading and writing.  What might be some of the potential perks and pitfalls of this free and fledgling web-technology?  Can the weblog be adopted for language teaching?  If so, what might be the students' response to *Blog Assisted Language Learning*?

### Historical Development

Web blogging started fairly innocuously around 1993 as a forum for the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA).  However, the term 'weblog' was not uttered until 1997 when an internet enthusiast Jorn Barger decided to rename his 'website' (Robot Wisdom), a 'weblog', and used the term to refer to websites that are continuously being updated.  The verb to 'blog' soon followed, as did the term 'blogsphere' to describe the ever expanding network of weblogs - "a dynamic place that is connected by time and topic"  (Blood, 2000).

### Working Towards a Definition of the Weblog

So what exactly is a weblog and how is it different from a website, email or online discussion?  There have been a number of upgrades to Barger's original definition of the weblog as a continually updated site, but since the term has yet to enter any published dictionary, the true meaning is almost as random as the process it describes.  Nevertheless, the general online consensus appears to be that a weblog is a website that is updated regularly and organised chronologically according to date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards.  Weblogs can also provide decentralised access rights which allows multiple authors.

The dynamic content of a weblog may sometimes resemble the 'Send to All' FW email, and its interactive nature, which often allows the reader to respond, also echoes the online discussion board.  However, the weblog is a unique entity.  It physically looks like a website rather than an email correspondence.  Furthermore it is less intrusive than FW email because it exists in its own autonomous space online,

rather than squatting in an inbox.  The threads of a weblog may sometimes resemble certain types of online discussion forum, but the weblog is generally organised around content posted and administered by one individual (or a group), rather than generated by the flow of participants in a discussion. On his weblog, *More about Weblogs,* Barret (1999) also sets weblogs apart from web pages, but in terms of the content, anticipated audience and purpose.  He explains that unlike weblogs, personal home pages are generally more likely to be devoted to photos of loved ones and pets, "a place to distribute information to a close circle of family and friends. Weblogs, however, are designed for an audience." (¶. 8). Blogs are often aimed at a broader readership than the blogger's own friends and family because they communicate with the diverse blogging community as a whole.

Most weblogs are now hosted by weblog providers such as 20six.co.uk or blogger.com and provide templates which do not require any technical, aesthetic or planning skills from the blogger.  It is this ease of use which sets many of the current weblogs apart from websites; publishing has never been easier!  Weblogs  also tend to have features which are not available on most regular web pages.  The comments feature, for instance, that allows the reader to write onto the weblog either directly or following approval from the author.  Some weblog companies also offer Email / SMS publishing which allows the blogger or a group of bloggers to post to the weblog directly using email or mobile phone messaging.  A subscription feature is also available, which enables the blogger to automatically receive updates of his/her favourite weblogs whenever these are updated.  This characteristic is also known as RSS, known as Rich Site Summary or Real Simple Syndication and its potential is huge.  As Richardson (2004) points out under the heading "Subscribe to My Homework Page!" teachers can *subscribe* to their students' weblogs and will automatically be notified whenever changes are made to these weblogs.

In short, the weblog offers a free online publishing house for anyone who cares to write and for those who care to read it.   Nevertheless the weblog did not really begin to become a household name until last year. Probably the most important factor which led to the explosion of the web log phenomena last year, and to the increasing use of the term 'weblog' in the main stream lexicon, was the advent of the second Gulf War and the sudden popularity of Salam Pax, better known as the Gulf War Blogger.  Considered by some to be the Anne Frank of the Iraq invasion and occupation, Welch (2003) in *Blogworld and its Gravity* describes how Pax, "now writes columns for *The Guardian* and in July signed a book deal with Grove/Atlantic" (p. 6).  It could be argued that like the internet, which was conceived in the Cold War, the weblog was baptised by the Iraq War.  In fact, 2003 has been described by Barrios (2003), who has a website devoted to using weblogs in the writing class, as "the year of the blog" (p. 1).

**The Voice of the Weblog**

Often described as a kind of public journal, the weblog is usually motivated solely by the need for self-expression, and often communicates something about the personality, or adopted persona, behind the blog, through the style of writing and the choice of topics.  However, others might argue that a weblog is not really about the individual but the collective, the network; it is simply an elaborate list of links to other sites.  For this reason, Blood (2000) states the need for a clear distinction between the

filter style weblog which relies on links and the journal style blog which is more personal and reflective.   Similarly, Hasting's (2003) *Histories of the weblog. Blogging across the curriculum* draws attention to the duplicitous nature of the weblog which can be, "a frequently posted list of interesting web sites, or a personal diary of events and thoughts, or a combination of the two (among many things)" (p. 1).

The notion that weblogs are different because of their 'voice' is a recurring theme, and one which motivates Stiler (2003) in his article *Blogging and Blogspots: An Alternative Format for Encouraging Reflective Practice among Preservice Teachers*.  He argues that weblogs are more than online journals with links: "The real divergence is about voice.  Online journals look and read like public diaries, while weblogs feel more like reporting… weblogs are metatorial while journals are simply editorial" (p. 4).  In other words, the weblog's ability to accommodate multiple authors provides more dimensions and generates a different kind of discourse than the traditional journal.  On the *History of Weblogs* site, Winer (2002) describes weblogs as a "kind of a continual tour, with a human guide who you get to know.  There are many guides to choose from, each develops an audience, and there's also camaraderie and politics between the people who run weblogs, they point to each other" (p. 1)

## How Can Blogging Benefit the Composition Class?

For the language teacher the weblog is a timely arrival which can fulfil many of the needs identified for the effective teaching of writing.  The weblog provides a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provides a dis-inhibiting context and offers a completely new form with un-chartered creative potential.

### Genuine Audience

Teaching writing for an audience is a challenge especially when teaching to students who have never written anything in English except assignments for their teacher.  These students may not only have difficulty adjusting their writing to fit the reader, but may have trouble getting started because, aside from the final grade,  what they write does not mean anything to them because it does not need to mean anything to anyone else.  However when writing for a weblog, "the [online] audience is not only anticipated but expected, and thus influences and structures the very manner in which the writer articulates, composes, and distributes the self-document" (Kitzmann, 2003, p. 1).  Kitzmann describes how the potential of online celebrity provides a powerful motivating force for the writer, playfully re-appropriating Descartes' maxim to describe the existential stimulus of the compulsive blogger, "I write about myself, therefore I am" (p. 6).

### Authentic Communicative Content

In *Classroom Practice: Authentic Audience on the Internet*, Opp-Beckmann (1999) describes the benefits of having an audience that is multicultural, responsive and networked.  She celebrates how the developing technology of new media also enables students to become both the author and the audience, and can even provide

communication between the different audiences (p.80).  Because weblogs can offer two-way communication through group blogs and comments, there is literally a new dimension to this type of composition.  As Wrede (2003) points out:

> Weblogs are both monologues and dialogues and therefore can benefit from the advantages of both forms and they also intersect e-mail, discussion forums, instant messaging and conventional electronic publishing, they are continuous in the sense that they are not result oriented but process oriented. (p. 2).

## Process Driven Composition

Indeed, continually updating a weblog, like regularly writing in a journal, may help writing students to appreciate that writing is an ongoing process, but with the added bonus of an instant and interactive audience.  This advantage is described in *Writing with Weblogs* where Kennedy (2003) describes how weblogs "combine the best elements of portfolio-driven courses where student work is collected, edited, and assessed, with the immediacy of publishing for a virtual audience" (p.4).

## Peer Reviewed Writing

Furthermore, the audience brings its opinions, advice and criticism which as Stiler (2003) explains may "enhance the development of student reflectivity" (p. 2).  This point is also discussed by Welch in his article "Blogworld and its Gravity" in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, where he explains how journalists' stories are discussed and evaluated for factual details online, and how this has led to some reporters changing their stories after being challenged by bloggers.  Welch (2003) claims that those who report the news now have, "something approaching real peer review, in all its brutality.  If they truly value the scientific method, they should rejoice.  Blogs can bring a collective intelligence to bear on a question" (p. 7).  Likewise, Levey (in Glen, 2003) explains that blogging "has some of the best aspects of peer review built into it."  And he goes on to explain how this aspect contributes positively to the quality of academic research: "Scholars' entries are instantly monitored and responded to by others as well-informed as they are" (p. 2).

## 'Disinhibition'

In addition to providing a critical audience, another advantage that the weblog provides is the ability to communicate without the inhibitions and preconceptions that accompany most face-to-face interactions.  Roed (2003) investigates this factor in her article, *Language Learner Behaviour in a Virtual Environment*, and explains how,

> People behave differently when communicating online compared to a face-to-face situation.  Research has shown that when communicating online, people show fewer inhibitions, display less social anxiety, and reduce their public self-awareness" (p.155).

Roed also describes how the, often false, notion of anonymity that people have when communicating via the computer can be a major advantage for the language learner because it cuts down on anxiety and helps develop confidence.  She explains

that the term "disinhibition" has been coined to identify this factor.  Disinhibition has been described by Johnson (1998) as "any behaviour that is characterised by an apparent reduction in concerns for self preservation and the judgement of others" (Johnson in Roed, p.44).  Roed (1998) also looks at how this phenomena affects the class as a whole, and observes that, "The group dynamics of the classroom are altered once the classroom becomes virtual" (p.157).

I have observed this phenomenon when teaching using CACD (Computer Aided Class Discussion).  Some of the most vocal "disinhibited" students in this online discussion were the more inhibited students in class.  When browsing through my students' weblogs, I noticed that some of the quietest students had the loudest blogs!  For instance, I have a covered Muslim female student who prefers to sit alone, and barely speaks unless prompted, yet her blog was an outpouring of opinion and insight, illustrated with vibrant colours and images!  Through anonymity, online environments can liberate the students that are intimidated in the classroom and plug them into a matrix where shyness and insecurity are left offline.

**The Rhetoric of Blogging**

Udell (2001) reports that the weblog phenomenon has "emerged as a genuinely new literary / journalistic form" (in Stiler, 2003, p.4).  In *That different place: Documenting the self within online environments*, Kitzmann (2003) confirms Walter Benjamin's belief that "technology has within it a 'nature' that comes from its own form" (p.10).  Kitzmann suggests that new technology creates new concepts of communication, and concludes that blogging may be "constructing new forms and practices of both public and private space that have roots not only in culture but in the 'nature' of the technology itself" (p.10).

The technology of blogging can provide dynamic content, connect multiple authors, facilitate an interactive relationship with an infinite and unknowable audience, allow the adoption of multiple personas, and incorporate multimedia.  So it seems logical that the writer who uses the weblog and more pertinently the reader who seeks it out, will develop certain expectations and 'needs' that may not have existed in previous modes of communication.  In this context, weblogging almost seems like an upgrade of writing but like most upgrades is a mixed blessing.  Kitzmann quotes from Hansan's (2000) book *Embodying Technesis: Technology beyond Writing*, in which he proclaims, "Technology thus does not serve humankind, but rather 'cosmological complexification,' resulting in the constant necessity on our part to 'keep up with the technological expressions of cosmological chance'" (p. 3).  One example of 'cosmological complexification' is the way that weblogs have already become a victim of their own success.  There are now so many of them that they are now "as confusing as the web itself" (Blood, 2000, p.6).

## How can Blogging Benefit the Reading Class?

**Content and Reading Strategies**

In addition to promoting extensive writing skills, it could also be argued that blogs help to develop reading skills through both content and form.  For the L2 language learner, a wide choice of readily available L2 content covering a myriad

range of current topics is available for free online.  This material is also an invaluable source of *authentic* and communicative language in use.   As Chun (1998) observes *in Using CACD to Facilitate Interactive Competence*, "For language learners in particular, computer networks and electronic mail provide students with opportunities for authentic communication with native speakers of the target language" (p. 57).  Another serendipitous advantage of blogging for the student is that the weblog reader, like the web surfer, develops effective lateral skimming and scanning skills through regular use of this medium.  These are skills which can then be used outside of the blogsphere and in the world of study.

**Active Reading**

It might also be argued that writing blogs helps the students to read blogs and vice versa because through writing, the writer becomes more aware of the notion of audience; and through reading, s/he becomes more familiar with the corresponding idea of purpose.  The distinction between the reader and the writer is further blurred through the communicative nature of the weblog and the ease of online publishing.  Many weblog hosts now feature a constantly updated list of the most recently 'published' blogs in continual rotation.  This means that the weblog reader can also skim through these 'racks' of blogs at random, like browsing through magazines in a library rather than searching for a particular book.  The most active bloggers are most often seen in these racks and are therefore more likely to have the most frequently read blogs.  This could be a powerful motivating factor for the blog writer to write regularly in order to develop a readership.

**Fallibility**

A further, more questionable, 'advantage' of using weblogs as reading material is that they expose the reader to fallible resources and diverse viewpoints, which may indirectly assist the student in developing critical thinking skills, although a more likely and unfortunate outcome is that some readers may be duped by inaccurate detail, false claims and questionable agendas.

**What Are Some of the Weblog's Potential Shortcomings?**

Like any other medium, the weblog has its shortcomings and these will no doubt generate a great deal of debate as blogging becomes more ubiquitous in academia.  It could be argued that not only does the weblog expose the students to some questionable readings, but that the format itself may have a detrimental effect on reading, writing and confidence.

**Superficial Reading**

In *Weblogs and Discourse,* Wrede (2003) explains that just as weblog authors are not usually professional writers, weblog readers are not generally professional readers either.  He warns that "this reading can't compensate for the weak writing skills of authors and potentially could be characterized as a kind of ...seeing what one wants to see, (selective perception)" (p. 5).  There is a danger that the reading skills that are developed from scrolling the computer screen lead to an accelerated but superficial, and often inaccurate, understanding of the content.

**Sloppy Writing**

Wrede (2003) also voices concerns about some of the disadvantages to writing skills that may be developed from activities such as blogging, suggesting that "technology can backfire if it takes too much control over representation" (p.5). This appears to echo the concerns of those who believe that technological communication advances such as instant messaging and mobile phone SMS[1]-ing are also having a negative affect on literacy.  There have been many cases of students using phrases like BTW (by the way) cuz (because) and U (you) in submitted written work, and there was a well documented case of a student in Scotland who wrote her entire essay in SMS (Hammersly, 2003).

In addition to the possible disadvantages related to reading and writing, there are other risks linked to the public nature of weblogging.  Students who post their work and ideas in the pubic sphere may receive some criticism which could be unproductive, hurtful or even offensive.  If necessary, the students can block comments on their blog pending approval from the author.  They also need to ensure that their own comments on other's blogs do not unwittingly cause offence.

**Netiquette**

Similarly, students also need to take care to ensure that their own comments might not accidentally cause offence.  For example, a student who posts, "Do you understand now?!!!" might be attempting to convey a supportive smile and a friendly laugh with the exclamations, but the reader might interpret these marks as an aggressive rebuke.  Likewise with the use of capital letters (CAPS), this is seen by many as a form of shouting.   However, to the novice blogger who posts a blog in capital letters it might mean that they do not know about this particular form of netiquette, or how to deactivate the 'Caps Lock' button.

**Security**

Aside from communication difficulties the language teacher using weblogs should also consider security issues.  Like websites, weblogs have the potential to be hacked, accidentally deleted or suddenly out of service when most needed.  For this reason, hard drive backups and printouts of material posted to weblogs are essential. Furthermore, "Students should be apprised of the lack of anonymity on Blogger and of the need to use discretion in writing about sensitive, personal subjects" (Stiler, 2003, p. 9).

## Is it Worth Blogging?

**Push Button Publishing for the Pupils**

So after all the introductory bluster, is blogging more trouble than it is worth? Is it simply just another fad, destined for a place in history alongside CB radio, and Esperanto?  I think not.  Even with its obvious shortcomings, the one thing that will

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[1] SMS is the Short Message Service offered to mobile phone users, which allows them to send text messages to other phones.  Due to the restrictive keyboard of the mobile phone, a lexicon of abbreviations and smileys '☺' has emerged from this method of communication.

keep blogging alive is encapsulated in Blogger[tm]'s slogan, "push button publishing for the people."  In the cover story of *Columbia Journalism Review*, Welch (2003) celebrates that blogging sites have provided the ability for anyone to "write, edit, design, and publish her own editorial product –to be read and responded to by millions of people, potentially – for around $0 t0 $200 a year.  It has begun to deliver on some of the wild promises about the Internet that were heard in the 1990's" (p. 3).

This notion that with the coming of the blog, the internet is keepings its, almost Marxist, pledge to hand the means of production back to the masses is repeated in *Scholars who Blog*.  In this article, Glen (2003) quotes Balkin (2003), a law professor and director of the *Information State Project at Yale University*, who states that "The development of the blog lowers the cost of publishing to the vanishing point.  It really does help realize the promise of the internet as a place for wide-ranging public discussion" (p.1).  Welch (2003) goes beyond 'public discussion' and describes weblogging as, "impressive, spontaneous acts of decentralized journalism" (p.3).  If this is the case, could the birth of the blog be the beginning of the end for professional journalism?  Welch dismisses such "really dumb questions" and suggests that "A more productive, tangible line of inquiry is: Is journalism being produced by blogs, is it interesting, and how should journalists react to it?  The answers… are 'yes', 'yes'; and 'in many ways'" (p. 8).

## The Future of Blogging

From the impact that it has already had in the worlds of journalism and academia, a hopeless optimist might suggest that weblogs are not a fad but a glimpse of a brighter future.  A future in which the media is decentralised and accountable and our students are excited about writing again because the whole world is watching their words –and not just their writing teacher.  This *performance* aspect of the weblog may encourage students to not only think about what they say but also how they say it. This can be illustrated in the rhetorical style employed in the following excerpts from two student's blog on their favourite things:

> Although Egyptians call it Shisha, Lebanese call it  Nargila, and in English it is Hookah, in my own language I call it Relaxation (Bin Ahmed, 2004)

> The universe have been blessed with a beautiful gift, the stars. Stars are there for alot of purposes, such as; to help sailors find their way to navigate around the world. Another aspect is to beautify our nightly sky..  I picked my best, most shinning and talented star, his name is Enrique Miguel Presler Iglesias. (Najm, 2003).

In her history of weblogs, Blood (2000) explains why she feels so passionately that weblogs need to be taken seriously, "I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and readers from 'audience' to 'public' and from 'consumer' to 'creator'" (p.7).

Unlike websites, weblogs are as easy to set up as a *Hotmail* email account. For this reason, they have the potential to become as omnipresent as *Hotmail*, but

unlike email, the weblog allows anyone with a computer to send one message to the whole world.  It seems that educators cannot afford to ignore this phenomenon and according to *Wired (2002)* magazine, they are not.  The University of Southern California is already offering a course in blogging as part of their online journalism course.  And the interest extends way beyond journalism, "Teachers at every level from elementary school to MBA are trying to bring blogs into their classrooms" (Lohnes in Schachtman, 2002, p. 2).

## The Use of Weblogs in an L2 Writing Class

### The Assignment Prompt

In order to get my students blogging, I started out by designing an assignment with one eye on the syllabus and the other on the 'blogsphere' to come up with the topics of news, views and reviews.  I wanted the students to respond to an item in the news; articulate their opinions about an issue of their choosing; and critique a film and a book.  I chose these topics because they were 'authentic'; that is they commonly appear on weblogs, and also because of several communication needs that needed to be addressed in the course.  In order to have sufficient time to develop, the weblog was introduced at the beginning of the course and collected at the end.  There were also a couple of posting deadlines to ensure that the students had started posting their blogs.

### Setting Up

In the beginning, a PC lab session was devoted to helping the students to set up, and showing other weblogs, including one which I made myself to serve as a guide to the assignment prompt.  The class visited the PC lab another three times during the semester, and this lab time was used to show how to email postings, print from web pages wider than paper, import images, comment on others' weblogs, and for blogging and general troubleshooting.  Unfortunately the latter took most of my time, so the students did most of their blogging at home.  Thankfully because blogging is asynchronous, this was not a major problem.

### Community Learning

To ensure that my student bloggers had an audience, I asked the students to read each others' blogs as part of their grade.  To facilitate this I simply set up a web page which contained links to everybody's weblog.  The weblog service that we used also allowed the students to award points, known as 'sweeties', so at the end of the course I gave prizes to the two blogs in each class that had been given the highest number of sweeties by their peers.  A more traditional peer review took place midway through the course when students handed in printouts of their weblogs which were reviewed by their peers.

### Assessment

The weblogs were assessed using a portfolio which contained printouts from the weblog plus a collection of the comments that each student had made on other people's blogs.  I provided deadlines to post and a much later deadline for the final

portfolio.  This was for two reasons: firstly to check that blogs were posted throughout the course, ensuring that there were enough blogs for the students to read; secondly to encourage process writing because it is easy for the blogger to go back and edit the grammar or content.

On Wrede's (2003) weblog, Stephne Downes argues that "if we have to convince people to blog, to in some way grade them or mark them, then in so doing we lose what is essential to blogging" (p. 1).  In theory I would agree with Downes that, semantically, a weblog which is anything other than self motivated is not really a true weblog, in the same way that an authentic text is no longer an authentic text if the teacher has provided a glossary for it.  However, coerced-blogging can still produce excellent weblogs, and hopefully some students will continue their blogs after assessment.  Furthermore, their membership of this growing discourse group may help to develop their communicative skills beyond their Com 101 class.  In such classes, blogging could help to provide some relief from English class clichés, such as the standard 5-paragraph essay, and provide the students with a genuinely communicative environment to express themselves more naturally and fluently.

**What did the Students Think?**

At the end of the course, but before they had received their final grades for the weblog portfolio, my students were given a survey to assess the effectiveness of this assignment.  These students are all non-native English speakers of high-intermediate to advanced level from a variety of backgrounds.  Forty students were surveyed from two classes, twenty from each class.  The following chart [Figure 1.] collates the first part of this survey which consisted of simple 'yes', 'not sure', or 'no' responses:

**Figure 1: The Students' Responses**
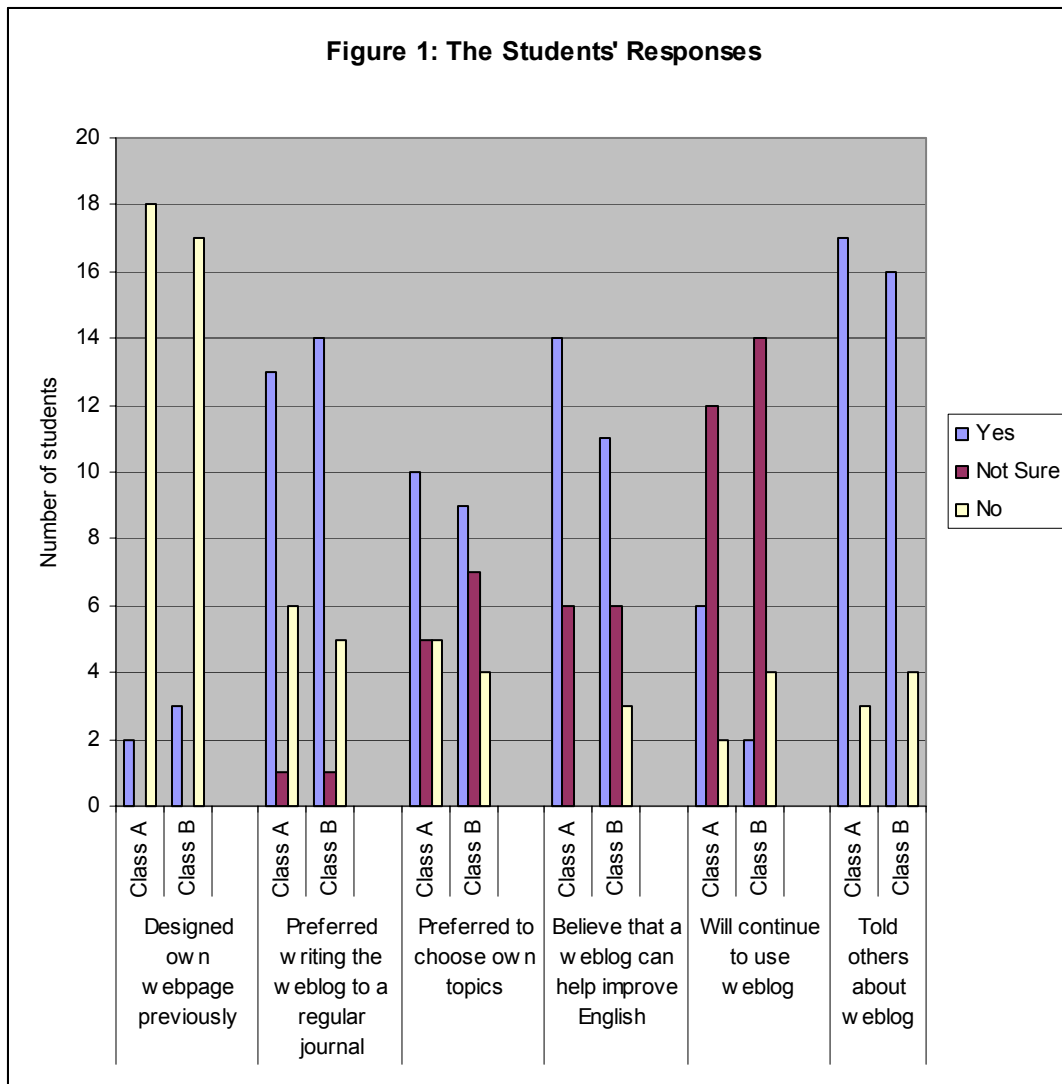


From these results it is possible to deduce the following points:

- Two or three students in each class had designed a web page before.
- Approximately two thirds of the class preferred writing the weblog to the more traditional written journal
- Generally more students would rather choose their own topics
- Most students believed that the weblog can improve English; three disagreed
- Eight students said that they would definitely continue using the weblog; six said they definitely would not, and the majority were unsure.
- Thirty three students told somebody else about the weblog.

These findings seem to confirm that despite generally having no prior experience of web design, most of the students enjoyed the assignment, believed that it was helping the improvement of their English and that it assisted them in producing good work. I would deduce the latter point from the number of students that publicized their weblogs to family and friends (37 out of 40) which might suggest some level of pride (or lack of shame!) in what they had created.

To respond comprehensively to all of the students' suggestions on the latter part of the questionnaire would take more time and space than we have here. Therefore samples of the most common and the most notable responses are discussed in this section.  Obviously because all of the feedback is not included here, this report is not truly representative; however, it does contain an accurate reflection of the weblog experience.

In answer to the question, "Apart from this course, what else do you think you could use a weblog for?"  Keeping in touch with friends and family was the most common response.  Many of the students from other countries recognised that the weblog could be a great way of keeping in touch with their loved ones back home. Other notable responses to this question included the recognition of the weblog as a forum for creative expression:  One student mentioned that it could be an online diary or a place to post her pictures, drawings and paintings, while another mentioned that it could be a place to establish his writing on the web.  Another respondent supported the notion of using the weblog for peer review, suggesting that the weblog is a good place to "take experience from" his friends' writing.

When asked, "Who did you tell about your weblog?" the most common responses were friends (23) and family (13), another mentioned his room mate and one student said she had told her high school English teacher.  I am convinced that many more people read the students' writing as a result of it being posted online rather than slipped discreetly under their Com teacher's door.  I also think that this encouraged the writers to take more care over what they produced.

I also asked the question, "What was the most memorable thing that you read on other students' blogs?"  This was in order to discover what types of writing work well on the blog and how I might best adapt the writing prompt next semester.  Two of the following respondents mentioned the news section, which required the student to write about an item in the news.  And the news stories they remembered were the most shocking; for example, a story about children on planes being locked in a cage and put in cargo as they make a lot of noise.  This was an obvious spoof of which there are many on the web; however, many of the students did not find this story amusing because they thought it was genuine!  This is proof that some students tend to believe everything that is published, even if it is only published online.

Other blogs that the students found memorable included a beautiful description of Palestine as a place of peaceful pastoral beauty rather than a dangerous, battle-scarred urban nightmare.  Another was an excellent essay about the current Iraq war written by a Kuwaiti student, which effectively challenged the position put forward on my weblog arguing against the war.

When asked, "What did you like the most about the weblog assignment?" One notable response was that the freedom of choosing topics helped to express and reflect personality and personal views.  A couple of students highlighted how they appreciated the process approach of the assignment, one stating that she liked, "being able to fix it as much as I could and getting feedback from people."  Another commented that "I was able to take the time I needed and come up with ideas and great thoughts.  I was able to go back and edit some mistakes I made."  Similarly peer review was mentioned by one student who observed that the weblogs "improve our

ability when we see the others' work." Other students said they enjoyed the "fun" novelty of the assignment which "didn't feel like writing essay." They also enjoyed the communicative aspect, and the fact that the blog was their own creative endeavor.

Dislikes mainly focused on technical problems, of which there were many with 20six.co.uk. Most of the students wisely wrote their posts in Word so that they could check the spelling and grammar and save a back up; however, when they pasted from Word to the weblog the formatting would often be changed by the transition. Many found themselves with an unwanted white background and font sizes that they could not change. This tainted some of the students' pride in their blogs - when their babies turned ugly they stopped loving them. Some of those that decided to post their blogs directly to the site were faced with an even more harrowing prospect, vividly described by this student: "Once at midnight, I was on my weblog account typing my news, and as soon as I was done I clicked on save and **BOOM** it was all erased because I was 'inactive' for too long!" For similar reasons, another student wisely suggested "find another site [weblog provider] on the web that is easier to deal with."

A couple of the negative comments that were written about the weblog could actually be construed as positive points. One student unwittingly vindicated the process approach of extensive writing when he complained, "I had to do the work 3 times, 1st do it, 2nd post it, 3rd polish it." Another brought in the effect of audience on composition when he complained that "I have to write really good topics cause everyone will read my work."

When I asked the students how I could improve this assignment, I received some very constructive feedback which I will use as the foundation for the next draft of this assignment. A couple of students suggested smaller topics rather than the 'big' book and film reviews, and many asked for more freedom of choice of topics for weblog posts. Other suggestions included the obvious request to extend the deadlines, or even to drop the posting deadlines and just have one deadline at the end of the course. I have not adopted the latter suggestion because I suspect that it could lead to a semester of blank weblogs, followed by a frantic flurry of activity during the last week and a lot of unread material online.

In conclusion, I am confident that as long as weblog providers continue to behave like email providers, and offer free and easy blogging services, the use of weblogs will continue to grow apace. There is every indication that weblogs will become more common than home pages and second only to email in online communication. As language teachers, if we are to equip our students with the ability to communicate in the online age we cannot afford to ignore blogging, or neglect the opportunities that this new medium offers. Like the student portfolio before it, the weblog faces challenges with practicality and security, but ultimately provides an alternative way to teach and assess authentic writing and reading skills. Blog Assisted Language Learning not only provides teachers with an exciting new way to approach communicative language learning, it also gives the students a new reason to enjoy reading and writing!

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