WEBLOGS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

by Galina Kavaliauskienė

Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania

Galina_Kavaliauskiene@yahoo.com

Introduction

Currently majority of learners are well familiar with the Internet and enjoy using it for a variety of purposes such as searching for information, writing e-mails, communicating via Skype service, using online chat-rooms and forums, etc.

Recent innovations of e-learning include individual websites, or weblogs (blogs for short), which have an immense potential as a valuable tool for teaching writing in a second language.

The advantages and disadvantages of weblogging have been described by A. P. Campbell (2003), D. Eastment (2005), J. Egbert (2006), B. Goldwin-Jones (2003), A. Johnson (2004), G. Stanley (undated online). The major advantages of weblogging in language classes comprise writing and instant publishing online, awareness of having a web wide readership, individual reading practice, developing critical skills, and creating an e-portfolio of students work. Common disadvantages are the loss of interest by some learners, forgotten usernames and passwords (this leads to inability to log in and edit one's entries), failure to read and comment on peers' written work, outdated weblogs.

Neither teachers nor learners need any knowledge of HTML for weblogging. Weblogs are easily linked and cross-linked to create online communities. Self-publishing promotes learners' responsibility and a sense of ownership because students are aware of writing for a real audience.

In spring of 2006 the author of this contribution initiated and conducted application of weblogging in English classes taught by colleagues. The research into the use of weblogs and its implications is published online (Kavaliauskienė, Anusienė, and Mažeikienė, 2006).

Lesson plan

Level: pre-intermediate and above

Time: at least 3 classes of 90 minutes (could be more, if the teacher and students find activities beneficial to teaching/learning)

Aims: The students

    1   learn how to create an individual website

2   use individual websites for instant online publishing of their written contributions (written work may comprise essays, summaries, description of learning experience, etc.)

3   read other students' contributions

4   write their responses to peers' written work in the 'comments' sections of the weblogs

5   share individual opinions on published written work in a follow up class discussion

Resources

1   A classroom with a computer for each student

2   Access to the Internet

3   Each student must have an e-mail address (it is a requirement by a blogger service software; otherwise a weblog cannot be created)

4   Individual earphones in each computer (for online listening assignments)

Possible problems

No access to the Internet on the scheduled day due to the server failure

Procedure

- Use a free service available online http://www.blogger.com. This service is reliable and easy to use.

- Prior to class, set up a teacher's weblog. It will help the teacher to go over the stages and see possible pitfalls such as inapplicable username (that already exists) or password, which must be at least 6 characters long.

- Prior to the online session, explain the steps of setting up a weblog in detail: 1) create an account, 2) name your weblog, 3) choose a template. Write down the major steps on the board. It will save the time online – students will know exactly what to do, particularly if they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary.

- During class, suggest that students think of appropriate username and password.

- During class, suggest that learners use the first letter of the Christian name and their full surname for titling (naming) individual weblogs, e.g. http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com, or just their surname, e.g. http://mazeikiene.blogspot.com. It might help to avoid rejected titles by a blogger software and simplify teacher's work linking students' weblogs with his/her own.

Personalizing weblogs gives learners a sense of ownership and facilitates recollection of weblog's title.

- During the Internet session, have all students open the http://www.blogger.com site and start setting up individual websites.

- Emphasize that students must write down their username and password. If they forget this information, they will not be able to enter their weblogs and edit them (i.e. they will have to create a new weblog in order to continue weblogging)

- As soon as students completed the task of creating their weblogs, give them the first assignment. It might be any task that the teacher wants students to do in class. A useful tip: whatever the assignment – it should be finished during class. Extra homework is not advisable at this stage.

- A writing assignment is the best task for the start. It might be any task that is relevant to learners, such as writing a summary of the text they have read, or sharing experience of participating in the sport event, or describing their plans for the coming weekend, etc.

A useful tip: creative writing is more enjoyable than a routine activity, but it should not

Interfere with the course curriculum and be a sheer waste of classroom time.

- Follow up stage offline is a class discussion of the experience of setting up weblogs and writing activity. Brainstorm learners' feedback on the first weblogging activity: difficulties, likes, dislikes, needs, future plans, etc.

- Another online session might be devoted to reading peers' written entries and writing comments in the appropriate columns of individual weblogs. Writing comments on peers' written work is a must which allows learners to collaborate and highlights the notion of writing for the audience.

- Encourage students to personalize their websites by placing pictures or giving personal information. However, if the learners are reluctant to do this, the teacher should not insist upon it in order to avoid negative emotions.

- The teacher should upload students' weblogs into his / her weblog through the 'link' procedure. It would allow the teacher to enter learner's individual weblog and write comments (but not edit any entries). In other words, the teacher's feedback on written work is provided in the 'comments' columns of learners' individual websites.

Unfortunately, this makes some extra work for teachers, but it is worth noting that teacher's feedback does not have to involve correction of errors – it is sufficient to point them out and ask students to introduce corrections. Such an approach develops learners' awareness of language usage.

- The next online session might be online listening using, for instance a diversity of available. A podcast is the name of a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar programs, which are published on the internet as MP3 files. A good example of related links is http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts. Two important aspects in choosing a podcast are relevance to students and transferability (P. Constantine, 2007).

- Recommend your students to open and scrutinize well organized blogs. For example, http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/communicate/blog/teacher/

  http://www.graemedavis.blogspot.com/.

- Another possibility is an autonomous search for interesting weblogs using a Google search engine. At present Google search gives 71,300,000 sources (January 2007). It is estimated that there are 60,000,000 weblogs online. This activity might be educational for those learners who would like to contribute more sophisticated contributions to their websites.

Ready-to-do resource for weblogging lesson

First online session

- Instruct students on the procedure of setting up a weblog.

- Set up individual weblogs using online service http://www.blogger.com.

- Give students a short writing assignment, e.g. Self-assessment of Language Skills (**Appendix 1**). Learners describe their strengths and weaknesses in Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking.

- Other themes for writing might be in accordance with the concrete curriculum in your English classes. For example, in my English for Specific Purposes (Law) classes I used the following: 1. Freedom of Speech in Different Countries; 2. Copyright and Its Infringement; 3. Child Abuse – Violation of Human Rights; 4. Jury System: Advantages and Disadvantages.

- Limit the scope of individual contribution – up to 200-300 words. Monitor students' activity by giving individual attention or advice when necessary. Remind learners to publish their entry by clicking "post" button, otherwise a contribution will be lost.

- Offline stage – get learners' feedback on their difficulties, likes, dislikes, needs, and wishes. Note them down. It will help you to improve e-activities in the future.

Second online session

- Arrange reading peers' written entries and writing comments in individual blogs by learners.

- Arrange individual online listening practice. See an example in Appendix 2. You can also use either of the following websites: iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts or http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/.

- Ask learners to describe their listening experience in the second entry to the weblog.Encourage them to evaluate their performance and discuss strengths and weaknesses that occurred in listening, comprehension of vocabulary, pronunciation.

- Offline activity: class discussion of listening problems, clarification of problematic vocabulary, future plans for improving listening skills.

Follow up sessions – information for thought

To some extent, weblogs can be viewed as e-portfolios, i.e. collections of students' written work, so the online sessions might be used for any writing assignments that teachers plan in the language course. Similarly to paper-portfolios, e-contributions are useful provided that learners reflect on their performance. Students' reflections (a few excerpts from the learners' weblogs) are reproduced in Appendix 3. Encourage your learners to analyze their contributions to weblogs critically, to note both positive and negative features and stimulate any creative activities that learners would initiate.

Teacher's work

- Upload learners' weblogs to your own weblog using "links" procedure.

- Go over learners' entries. Write your comments. Do not correct writing errors, just point them out and encourage learners to edit their writing by introducing corrections. The brief analysis of students' errors is given in Appendix 4.

Sharing experience

Here I would like to share my experience with teachers who might be interested in applying weblogs in English classes. For the sake of diversity, in my weblogging practice, I used online listening exercises to develop skills of listening by giving students individual practice. An example of the assignment is shown in the Appendix 2. Afterwards, students described their experience in their weblogs. Generally, individual listening practice seems to be more beneficial to learners than class listening.

Individual listening allows each learner to work at his / her own pace and listen to a passage as many times as they want to. In collective class listening practice, there are always a few students whose listening skills are better developed, and they inhibit their peers from extra practice. The point is that shy students often complain of difficulties in listening exercises. The chief complaint is "the native speakers in recordings speak too fast". De facto, it reveals learners'

inability to process information they hear fast enough to understand it. This explains why I emphasize the importance of individual listening online.

There are a number of good websites for developing listening skills. The best to start with is http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/. Go to For teachers site (on the left hand side of the page), enter Previous plans: 2006 2005. Then students can choose any news item in the list they want to. Each online lesson includes a reading text, listening practice, pronunciation exercise, vocabulary and its definitions followed by the True / False and matching exercises.

Implications

The implications of weblogging activity are numerous. First, application of weblogs in English classes can be used for raising language awareness and learner development. Second, weblogging can enhance the students' motivation due to the novelty and diversity of possible learning activities. Third, learning at one's own pace can help learners overcome their fear of making errors and enhance self-esteem. Fourth, weblogging is an enjoyable activity, which attracts the vast majority of students who are keen on having their own website. Fifth, the teacher can provide individual feedback to each learner, and students can receive feedback not only from classmates but also from any Internet reader. Finally, there is an opportunity for learners' reflection on their performance and achievements. In spite of the learners' products in weblogs being not perfect, they show how students learn and what teachers teach. Orienting learners toward personal publishing on weblogs can help prepare students for communication in the networked world.

References

Campbell, A. P. (2003). Weblogs for Use with ESL Classes. *The Internet TESL Journal,* 9(2), February 2003. Retrieved 10th March 2006 from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-Weblogs.html.

Constantine, P. (2007). Podcasts: Another Source for Listening Input. *The Internet TESL Journal,* 13 (1). Retrieved 29th January 2007, from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Constantine-PodcastListening.html.

Eastment, D. (2005). Blogging. *ELT Journal,* 59 (4), 358-361.

Egbert, J. (2006). The End of Call and How to Achieve It. *Teaching English with Technology: A Journal for Teachers of English,* 6 (2), May 2006. Retrieved 20th December 2006 from http://www.iatefl.org.pl/call/j_key24.htm.

Godwin-Jones, B. (2003). Blogs and Wikis: Environments for On-line Collaboration. *Language Learning & Technology,* 7 (2), 12-16. Retrieved 10th March 2006 from http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/emerging/default.html.

Johnson, A. (2004). Creating a Writing Course Utilizing Class and Student Blogs. *The Internet TESL Journal,* 10 (8). Retrieved 10th February 2006 from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Johnson-Blogs/.

Kavaliauskienė, G., Anusienė, L., and Mažeikienė, V. (2006). Weblogging: Innovations for Communication in English Class. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching,* 3(2), 220-233. Retrieved 18th December 2006 from http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/v3n22006/kavali.htm.

Stanley, G. (2006). Blogging for ELT. Retrieved 5th April 2006 from http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/resources/blogging.shtml.

Appendix 1.

ASSIGNMENT: WRITING A SELF-ASSESSMENT ESSAY

In your BLOGGER website write about your achievements in learning English. Mention your skills and performance in:

- READING

- WRITING

- LISTENING

- SPEAKING

- VOCABULARY

- MAKING PRESENTATIONS

- PARTICIPATING IN DISCUSSIONS

Also write WHAT activities in English classes you LIKE / DISLIKE and WHY.

Appendix 2.

ASSIGNMENT: INDIVIDUAL ONLINE LISTENING AND WRITING

Log on to the website http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/

TASK 1

1   Go to the section UP TO DATE (prof. David Crystal's website on new words)

2   Choose one topic (on the left hand side of the page)

3   Listen to prof. D. Crystal's recording as many times as you want, but do not read the tapescript

4   Read the tapescript and listen again

5   Note down the new words (if there are any)

6   Go to your blog site

7   Write down your opinion on your listening experience. Don't forget to post it in your blog.

TASK 2

1   Choose another topic on the LEARNING ENGLISH page

2   Listen but not read

3   Read the tapescript and listen again

4   Note down new vocabulary

5   Write your opinion on the online listening practice in your blog. Don't forget to post it.

Appendix 3.

LEARNERS' REFLECTIONS ON INDIVIDUAL LISTENING PRACTICE

Here are a few excerpts from students' weblogs. Errors have not been corrected.

http://bozenaa.blogspot.com/

Today we have done a very interesting task during our English classes. We were doing listening tasks online. It was a little bit difficult to listen to the recordings because all the students listened at once. Well, while listening to the recording I learned many new things. I liked such kind of task very much. During the task I not only practiced listening but I also found out much new information. I liked such kind of task very much.

http://migiedre.blogspot.com/

Hole in the wall. Now I would like to share my impression about this task. Firstly, I had to choose one topic and listen to this recording .I chose,, hole in the wall''. During the listening I heard the meaning of this phrase. So Hole in the wall means an automatic cash dispenser. However I heard some unknown phrases such as hypheps, hither or oomph, which I translated from the vocabulary. So, this task was useful. However, I had some difficulties, because

everybody were hearing different recordings at the same time. Because of that I had to listen my topic several times. After that I read the text and then I understood more. Summing all up it seems that this task was and useful and a bit difficult, but very interesting.

http://zbudaite.blogspot.com/

Listening for this text was more difficult, because there were a lot of unknown words. However it was quite easy to guess those words from the context. In generally, I am not satisfied with my listening skills, they're terrible!

http://javinaite.blogspot.com/

Hole-in-the Wall. This listening task was quite interesting and I found it not so difficult as I imagined before. In my opinion it is very useful to experience such tasks as they improve my listening skills. There were some new words, which helped to improve my English. I would like to have more such listening practice in the future.

http://jpetkute.blogspot.com/

Spam.

Today I had a listening task online from the www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish page. I chose the topic about the spam, because this word is very often met in our today's life. This little, but very jumpy word keys up me every time I check my e-mail. So I was curious to know something more about it. I have found out more than I expected. Not only the meaning of the word, but it's origin as well. It shocked me a little. I even couldn't imagine that this word has any relation to the word "meat". That's great J

To tell the truth, it was a little bit difficult to hear the speaker, because there were other 8 girls trying to do the same. Fortunately, there was a text written as well, so it made easier all the work. I even wondered that there was no words I couldn't understand. It means only one, I was lucky today by choosing this topic, or my English isn't so poor as I thought J As many as I could hear, the pronunciation was understandable too. Maybe it because of the voice of the man, I don't want to flatter myself, but it can be my English listening ability is getting better and better. One thing I can say I really enjoyed this work.

Appendix 4.

ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN WORK

Learners' written errors can be divided into 'interlingual errors', i.e. errors that occur between English and the mother tongue, and 'intralingual errors', i.e. those that occur within the language being learned. The causes of the errors are: mother tongue interference, overgeneralization, interference from items within English - cross association and false analogy. Errors might have more than one source; there could be two or more causes operating at the same time. Errors made by the students do not demonstrate any difficulties in understanding the course material.

Many errors are made because of the students' carelessness or absent-mindedness. Some examples of spelling errors: a) personal pronoun "I" and words – "English", "British", "American" are not written in capital letters; b) some plural nouns ending in "y" – e.g. sumarys. Other common errors are missing articles, confusing the usage of the possessive case, missing –s in the 3rd person singular in present Simple, use of double negatives, misplaced apostrophes, subject-verb disagreement, usage of wrong prepositions and tenses; confused vocabulary, misuse of the infinitive and "to be". These errors have been due to mother tongue interference. Word order mistakes are also frequent, and they are caused by the fact that word order in the students' mother tongue is rather flexible.

Knowing/understanding the cause of errors can help teachers to help learners. When teachers are aware of learners' problems they are in a better position to decide what to do. The action teachers take can depend on a lot of different variables: whether the error is frequent or not, if it is important for communication or not, whether it takes place in a controlled or uncontrolled activity, if it is an individual problem or widespread amongst the group.