

Bloggng for ELT

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This article takes a look at blogging, which is becoming increasingly popular as a language learning tool. It gives an overview of blogging websites, suggests why you might want to use them, and gives some practical advice on setting up blogs for use with your own classes.

What is a blog?

A blog (short for **weblog**) is a frequently updated website that often resembles an online journal. It's so easy to create and update a blog – it requires only basic access to the Internet, and a minimum of technical know-how. Because of this, it is one of the easiest ways to publish student writing on the WWW. It's almost as easy as sending an email.

Nowadays, blogs can also display photos and some people are using them with audio and even video, but this article will concentrate on the basics, showing how a simple text-based blog can be used to great effect with your English language learners.

Types of blogs used in language teaching

Aaron Campbell (2003) has outlined three types of blogs for use with language classes:

The Tutor Blog is run by the teacher of a class. The content of this type of blog can be limited to syllabus, course information, homework, assignments, etc. Or the teacher may choose to write about his or her life, sharing reflections about the local culture, target culture and language to stimulate online and in-class discussion. In this type of blog, students are normally restricted to being able to write comments to the teacher's posts. A great example of this is Aaron Campbell's own The New Tanuki, <http://thenewtanuki.blogspot.com>

The Class Blog is a shared space, with teacher and students being able to write to the main area. It is best used as a collaborative discussion space, an extra-curricular extension of the classroom. Students can be encouraged to reflect in more depth, in writing, on themes touched upon in class. Students are given a greater sense of freedom and involvement than with the tutor blog. A very good example of what has been done with this type of blog is Barbara Dieu's Bee Online, <http://beeonline.blogspot.com> and Bee Online 2, <http://beeonline2.blogspot.com>

The Learner Blog is the third type of blog and it requires more time and effort from the teacher to both set up and moderate, but is probably the most rewarding. It involves giving each student an individual blog. The benefit of this is that this becomes the student's own personal online space. Students can be encouraged to write frequently about what interests them, and can post comments on other students' blogs. For examples, see the links to learner blogs from the class blog and tutor blog examples above.

Of course, teachers who decide to use blogs often use a combination of Tutor or Class blog and Learner blogs, with hyperlinks connecting them.

Why blog?

So, why should you blog with your students? There are many reasons why you may choose to use weblogs with students. One of the best reasons is to provide a real audience for student writing. Usually, the teacher is the only person who reads student writing, and the focus of this reading is usually on form, not content. With weblogs, students can find themselves writing for a real audience that, apart from the teacher, may include their peers, students from other classes, or even other countries, their parents, and potentially anyone with access to the Internet. Here are some other reasons for using blogs:

To provide extra reading practice for students. This reading can be produced by the teacher, other students in the same class, or, in the case of comments posted to a blog, by people from all over the world.

As online student journals that can be read by their peers. The value of using learner journals has been well documented. Usually they are private channels between teacher and student. Using a blog as a learner journal can increase the audience.

To guide students to appropriate online resources. The Internet has a bewildering array of resources that are potentially useful for your students. The problem is finding and directing your learners to them. For this reason, you can use your tutor blog as a portal for your learners.

To increase the sense of community in a class. A class blog can help foster a feeling of community between the members of a class, especially if learners are sharing information about themselves and their interests, and are responding to what other students are writing.

To encourage shy students to participate. There is some evidence to suggest that students who are quiet in class can find their voice when given the opportunity to express themselves in a blog.

To stimulate out-of-class discussion. A blog can be an ideal space for pre-class or post-class discussion. And what students write about in the blog can also be used to promote discussion in class.

To encourage a process-writing approach. Because students are writing for publication, they are usually more concerned about getting things right, and usually understand the value of rewriting more than if the only audience for their written work is the teacher.

As an online portfolio of student written work. There is much to be gained from students keeping a portfolio of their work. One example is the ease at which learners can return to previous written work and evaluate the progress they have made during a course.

To help build a closer relationship between students . Sometimes students in large classes can spend all year studying with the same people without getting to know them well. A blog is another tool that can help bring students together.

Where to start

There are lots of sites where you can set up a blog for free, but perhaps the best known and one of the most reliable and simple blogging tools to use with students is Blogger, <http://blogger.com>. It takes only fifteen minutes from setting up an account to publishing the first post using this valuable tool.

The teacher sets up the tutor blog or a class blog. With a Class blog, students will need to be invited to participate by e-mail. Learner blog accounts can either be set up beforehand by the teacher, or done at the same time with a whole class in a computer room. The former gives the teacher more control of student accounts, but some advantages of the latter is that learners are given more choice (of username, design of the blog, etc) and a greater sense of 'ownership' of their new virtual writing space.

Tips for managing learner blog settings

- Use the 'Settings' in Blogger to add yourself (under Members) as Administrator of the learner blog. This is invaluable if students later forget usernames or passwords, and can also help if inappropriate posts are published
- Make sure you change the setting and turn the 'Comments' feature on. This will allow the others to respond to things the students write on their learner blogs.
- Also in 'Settings', you will find an option to receive an email whenever a student publishes their blog. This will save you time regularly checking learner blogs to see if any of your students have posted. Another way of being informed of this is to use the 'Site Feed' function (discussed further below).

Keeping students interested

Many teachers who start to use blogs find the novelty factor is enough to create student interest in starting to use them. However, blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. If learners are not encouraged to post to their blogs frequently, then they can quickly be abandoned. A failed experiment. Here, the teacher in the role of facilitator is vital for maintaining student interest. Here are some ideas to how this can be done:

- Respond to student posts quickly, writing a short comment related to the content. Ask questions about what the learner writes to create stimulus for writing.
- Students should be actively encouraged to read and respond through the commenting feature of the blog to their classmates.
- Writing to the blog could be required, and it may form part of the class assessment. Students should be encouraged to post their writing homework on the blog instead of only giving it to the teacher.

Some ideas for activities

Mystery guest. Invite another teacher or someone from another school or country as a mystery guest to your blog. Ask the students to engage him or her in dialogue and guess their identity.

Project work. A blog is an ideal space for developing a project, especially if the project is a shared one between several classes or even classes in different countries.

International link-ups. Contact another educational establishment to see if they are interested in a joint blogging project. Students can write about their lives, culture, interests, etc, and be encouraged to read about the other class and respond by writing comments.

Photoblog. If you plan on using photographs in your blog, there are lots of tools available to help you. Flickr, www.flickr.com, makes publishing photographs to blogs easy. If you want to make photographs central to the blog, however, it is better to use a blogging tool such as Buzznet, www.buzznet.com, which is a photo publishing tool and blog rolled into one.

Pitfalls to watch out for

Unwanted comments. To avoid unwanted comments, you can restrict comments to people in the class or to registered bloggers.

Correction. It is difficult to use a blog for correcting students. Student written work can always be corrected before posting to the blog, or you can do class correction sessions using work published in the blogs.

Privacy. By their very nature, most blogs are public. Anyone with access to the Web can find and read a blog, and write comments (if this feature has been turned on). If privacy is an issue, then you will be better off using a blogging tool that allows different levels of access rights. Live Journal, www.livejournal.com, is a good choice, and is particularly popular with teenagers . Live Journal allows the setting up of a closed community, which could be restricted to the members of a class or to a wider circle including other classes, parents, etc.

Advanced feature

The easiest way to keep track of a lot of learner blogs is to use the 'Site Feed' feature. You will need to use another piece of software called a newsreader or aggregator to read site feeds. Using a newsreader means your e-mail in-box won't become cluttered with posted messages from students publishing their weblogs. One of the most popular, free web-based newsreaders is Bloglines, www.bloglines.com.