Review

Using blogs to promote reflective language learning

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Education is meant to bring about durable behavioral changes in the learner in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude. In addition to learning specific contents and acquiring skills that are pertinent to certain fields of study, students need to be able to get, from their school experiences, the methods and techniques that help them become life-long learners. Learning how to learn is a vital skill in the current dynamic socio-economic atmosphere. In such a context, students must be aware of the 'why' and the 'how' of their learning, have a high degree of awareness of their own learning and be responsible for its execution and progress. One way of promoting such learning is engaging students in reflective learning, a process which involves mentally revisiting the learning experience or event, interpreting it and evaluating what is gained from it. This short article reviews the works of two researchers, Mynard (2007) and Yang (2009), which center on using blogs to promote reflective language learning.

Key words: blogs, promote, reflection, critical reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is an important part of human activity and learning (Schon 1983). As Boud et al. (1985:19) put it, reflection is an activity in which people "recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it". According to these scholars, reflection involves returning to experience (recalling and describing salient events), attending to feelings (using helpful feelings and removing unhelpful ones), and evaluating experience (re-assessing experience in light of our purpose and existing schemata and integrating new knowledge into our conceptual framework). It also involves evaluating approaches to learning and identifying approaches that worked well to strengthen good practices.

Reflection entails deeper understanding that leads to greater self-awareness and control (Mezirow 1991), which in turn is believed to be an essential step towards a positive change. Reflective learners are believed to exhibit self-awareness, motivation, autonomy and the skill of controlling the process as well as the progress of their own learning. Such learners better understand their learning strengths and weaknesses; identify and question their underlying values and beliefs; acknowledge and challenge possible assumptions, acknowledge their concerns and identify possible inadequacies or areas for improvement. These learners thus develop autonomous learning skills through "capacity-for detachment, critical

reflection and decision-making and independent action" (Little, 1991: 4), each of which needs proper strategy use (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

However, critical reflection and inquiry do not come to students naturally and as a result, appropriate opportunities for reflection should be provided to them (Yang, 2009). One of the various strategies of reflective learning (reflective language learning inclusive) is using blogs (Brooks et al., 2004), cited in Mynard (2007).

REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING VIA BLOGS

A blog, a web site that contains an online personal journal with opinions, reflections, comments and often hyperlinks provided by the writer, has been reported to be a useful tool for language learners due to the growing popularity of online language teaching and the rise of new multimedia literacy, which promote collaborative and intercultural learning (Meskill and Anthony, 2011; Guth and Helm, 2010). Mynard and Yang, drawing on the works of different authors and researchers, provide informative details (in the introductory parts of their research reports) on the use of the blog as an important tool for reflective language learning.

Mynard points out that blogs encourage authentic

writing practice; enable students to recycle language input learned in the classroom; provide an alternative way of communicating with teachers and peers, and create a collaborative learning environment. Blogs expose students to motivating activities and initiate them to develop audience awareness, which according to Kelly (2006), is an important issue in authentic writing. It follows that blogs help students to critically reflect on their learning using cyber technology in a motivating way to write to a real audience; this in turn helps them to develop critical thinking skills. Mynard also reports that research indicated that second language learners in the Middle East appreciated the opportunity to review their blogs and correct their mistakes. This researcher continues to report that the research conducted by Brooks et al. (2004) with native speakers of English in a first year composition course in the USA showed that, with increased student awareness and interest in web-blogging, daily reflection became intensive.

According to Mynard, reflective language learning is not an end in itself; it rather leads to learner autonomy, which is an important educational goal (Dickinson, 1987; Lee, 1998; Scharle and Szabo, 2000). That is, while keeping blogs, students begin to demonstrate independent action by taking responsibility for ownership of the content and quality of what they write as they produce a publicly accessible text, and an idea expressed in a blog elicits a series of thoughts (comments and reflections), either by the original author or by his/her readers from all over the world, in the latter case resulting in continued communication and enhanced interaction.

Like Mynard, Yang emphasizes the benefits of blogs to enhance interactive language learning (writers create texts and readers respond with comments), to provide motivation (users can create blogs and add pictures and audio files to increase the attractiveness of their blogs), and to encourage critical thinking and reflection. Yang maintains that language learners can use personal blogs as an electronic portfolio (a purposeful compilation of student work that contains the student's efforts, progress and performances) to file their learned materials and experiences for later review and reflection. Language teachers can also use blogs to ask students questions or to encourage them to express viewpoints and concerns, and to enhance student-teacher or student-student interaction in the target language. This enables the teacher to facilitate peer feedback and self-assessment which can lead to reflection and learner control over the process and progress of learning.

As Yang puts it, students can set up a learning community through the blog and choose a topic of shared interest, collaboratively set objectives, formulate regulations and design formats that work best for them. For instance, by stimulating intensive reading in the target language, blogs can initiate students to establish a community of readers (for example, novel lovers). This can help them to read and comment on texts written by their blog counterparts in a personal and motivating way with the anticipation of persistent discussion, which allows intensified communication and reflection in a more learner-centered atmosphere. By doing so, students take charge of their own learning and move to the extent of controlling the spread of misinformation, which is one claimed demerit of blogs, within the learning community.

Generally, Mynard and Yang underline the role of blogs to promote reflective language learning. They claim that blogs can be taken as virtual language classrooms, since they allow people all over the globe to share opinions, viewpoints, concerns and reflections in the target language. Through blogs, students can document their reflections on their daily learning and/or important life experiences and share them with their blog counterparts (friends, families or group members). However, both Mynard and Yang maintain that whilst blogs are used in education, there is a scarcity of research about the use of blogs for language learning in different contexts. And that was why they set out to investigate the impact of blogs on reflective language learning in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUNDS

Maynard's study focused on twenty-six female Japanese students of English (18 to 19 years old) who had to spend a semester in the UK as part of their two year college program. While at a university language center in the UK, they were invited, on voluntary basis, to practice journal writing in the form of a blog in the second semester (twelve weeks) as a continuation of the handwritten journal they had been used to in the first semester (twelve weeks). These students were told that the blogs had to keep people in Japan informed about their activities and life experiences in the UK; they had to communicate with their teachers by writing about important events and experiences. Twenty out of twenty-six students continued doing their blogs autonomously in their free time (no guidelines were given in terms of length and frequency of journal entries).

On the other hand, Yang set out the study with forty-three teacher trainees (22 years old on average) in two teacher training institutions in Taiwan (twenty-eight from one institution and fifteen from the other). These students were exposed to courses on second and foreign language teaching methodology which contained theories regarding second language learning, teaching metho-dology, and practical teaching. The forty-three students did self-studies similarly scheduled by two English instructors (assignments and settings were the same), met weekly for two hours for a face-to-face learning of teaching methodology in the first half of the first semester (nine weeks), and practiced teaching in class in the second half (nine weeks). Each of the student teachers were required to design lesson plans, practice teaching

and keep reflective journals and post them via blogs to their teachers, who had initially explained concepts like critical thinking and reflection. After each class meeting, participants were required to post a reflection of his/her teaching practice and classroom experience including the teaching methods they learned, and optionally make comments on their peers' messages. To encourage critical thinking and reflection, the instructors commented on the student teachers' postings and challenged their views by asking pertinent questions.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The two researchers had slightly different aims. Mynard's study intended to find out whether students used personal blogs as tools for unprompted reflection and was general in its purpose. However, Yang attempted to investigate more deeply the types of reflection (descriptive or critical) involved in student teachers' reflections, the roles of student teachers in the process of blogging and how blogs can promote critical thinking, reflection and community practice. With this objectives in mind, the two researchers adopted research methods they thought were appropriate.

As highlighted previously, the two researchers adopted slightly different approaches to engage the target learners in the blogging exercise. Mynard focused on unprompted reflection; no guidelines, explicit training or specific inputs were provided to enable students to be aware of what reflection is and how it is done. On the other hand, in Yang's research, students were given explicit explanations by their teachers on concepts like critical thinking and reflection. In addition, schedules, assignments and classroom activities were decided by instructors. On the whole, while Mynard's subjects practiced blogging more autonomously, Yang's exercised reflection through blogging in a more instructor-mediated context.

Mynard collected contents of blogs (primary data) and categorized and coded them under eleven themes: Activity with friends (FE), activity with host family (HF), comparing Japan with the UK (J/E), reflecting on English skills (ENG), reflecting on study abroad experience (YK), class activity (CL), class trip (CT), self-introduction (SI), future plan (F), information or description (inf) and others (O), and applied a category analysis to blog contents based on the tenets of grounded theory (Kumar, 1996) to find out evidences of reflection.

Similarly, Yang collected primary data from student teachers' postings of messages and comments, their email dialogues and reflective dialogues recorded by the two instructors during class meetings on the implementation of blogs. This researcher also administered an end-of-semester questionnaire to gather trainees' opinions about their blogging and teaching experiences. Like Mynard, Yang conducted a category analysis on the

data grouped into five categories: theories of teaching (comments posted by the student teachers about second-language acquisition theories), instructional approaches and methods used (trainees' comments referring to their own knowledge, beliefs and use of methods), teaching evaluation and criteria (the feedback provided by the whole class after each micro-teaching), self-awareness (comments, postings, and discussion based on self-awareness and self-evaluation) and questions about teaching and requests for advice (questions asked by trainees pertaining to teaching practice and theory; requests for advice made by these trainees).

FINDINGS

Mynard's objective was to find out whether blogs could be used for unprompted reflective language learning (English in this case). The study indicated that 19% of students' postings were reflections on English lessons (test difficulty, disappointment with test results, workload, etc.), while 5% were reflections on experience of studying abroad. The findings depicted that students, regardless of ability and creativity in blogging, can use blogs as one means for reflection. However, Mynard discovered that some students were more likely to reflect on their learning using the blog than others (some students did not reflect at all). This might have something to do with instructor involvement, and that is why the researcher points out that the extent to which instructors promote the use of blogs as a tool for reflection remains unexplored.

Yang also found out that blogging promoted descriptive and critical reflections (more descriptive reflections than critical ones with the latter growing over time through consistent practice) among teacher trainees on their teaching and their observation of their peers' teaching practice. Blogs engaged participants in critiquing themselves and others, questioning the applicability of second language/SL teaching theories in EFL contexts, suggesting adjustments in applying SL teaching theories in EFL classrooms and freely complaining about the inconvenience of EFL environment for learning the target language. Yang's study implicitly demonstrated that teacher trainees assumed the roles of model follower (they followed teachers' questions and prompts), self-assessor, evaluator of peer teaching, critical thinker and reflective learner in the blogging process. They expressed concerns and asked questions to each other without limitations of time and space. This helped them to enjoy more freedom of expression, to examine their learning progress, reflections and views at a later time, and to build a learning community.

CONCLUSION

Mynard's and Yang's studies (both conducted in EFL

contexts) point out that there are ways in which blogs have the potential to promote reflective English language learning. Therefore, it is necessary that English language instructors encourage students who have access to the internet to create and use blogs to reflect (in English) on their learning and life experiences. In contexts where instructors themselves do not have awareness about and practice in using blogs, colleges and universities should offer ICT trainings to English staff. However, the above studies have not conclusively addressed the issue relating to the extent of teacher intervention in promoting reflective learning through blogs. In addition, Yang doubts whether disclosing students' identities along with their critical comments is a good practice, and comments that students may think that openly critiquing everything may jeopardize their grades. As a result of this fear, they may not post some sensitive topics and concerns on their blogs. These issues thus need further research.

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