

Blogs in English language teaching and learning: Pedagogical uses and student responses

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an innovative approach to the implementation of a cycle of blogging activities within different levels of courses in an English for academic purposes/composition program in an English medium university in Japan. Blogs, which are interactive homepages that are easy to set up and manage, enable students to engage in online exchanges, thereby expanding their language study and learning community beyond the physical classroom. Regular blogging also encourages more autonomous learning. When a student's audience includes his or her classmates, the teacher and potentially anyone with an internet connection, motivation to engage in meaningful written communication appears to increase. At the same time, when a teacher utilizing blogs implements a "blogging buddy" system, which assigns each student a peer review partner to help with editing before a piece of writing (the *blog post*) is uploaded, the result can be an effective means of facilitating greater learner interaction and reflection on skills development. Findings from an attitudinal survey conducted over two semesters with eleven classes of 145 students demonstrate that they had extremely positive attitudes toward both blogging and the blogging buddy system.

Introduction

Blogging in language learning communities

A university English language class is a community of learners. However, any written work that a student produces on paper can only be shared with one person at a time or disseminated via photocopies. Thus, for even a relatively small class of 16 students, it is impractical for all students to make their writing available in hard copy form to all other members of the class. Due to such limitations, a student in the traditional writing class has typically presented his or her work to the teacher alone, or at most, to a group of peer reviewers and then to the teacher.

When a language teacher introduces blogging activities within the language

classroom, the opportunities for student interaction and the horizons of that “learning space” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 232) are expanded exponentially, providing student writers with a far greater audience both within and outside the classroom. In his academic blog, Stanley (2006) notes that “(Blogs are) a way of opening up the classroom walls and showing the wider world what is happening... thus creating a small language learning community.” Similarly, while relating the findings of a series of interviews with bloggers in the Stanford University area, Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz (2004) relate how a rhetoric instructor/researcher using blogs explained that for students “blogging created a sense of community that would be less likely to emerge in a conventional classroom setting” (p. 41). Murray (2007) notes that a key feature of a “blog community” is the fact that all community members have easy access to each others’ blogs. This can be accomplished with moodle, a class wiki page, or the blog community’s homepage (which might also be called a ‘blog magazine’).

According to Darabi (2006), “The core principles of learning communities focus on integration of curriculum, active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility...” (p. 53). Blogging activities realize these principles. To illustrate, Pinkman (2005) writes that blogging becomes communicative and interactive when participants assume multiple roles in the writing process, as writers who write and post, as readers/reviewers who respond to other writers’ posts, and as writer-readers who, returning to their own posts, react to criticism of their own posts. Dieu (2004) reaffirms this by stating that blogging gives a learner the chance to “maximize focused exposure to language in new situations, peer collaboration, and contact with experts” (p. 26). Within the scope of classroom-based blog activities, assignments can require the student blogger to communicate closely with a particular group of student bloggers. Moreover, the exchange can be almost instantaneous (during class time) or at the leisure of the student bloggers. This combination of planned and spontaneous communicative exchanges inside and out of the classroom makes blogging a meaningful and engaging social exercise. It is within this context that Williams and Jacobs (2004) contend that blogging has “the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning” (p. 247).

The purpose of this paper

Bygate, Skehan, & Swain (2001) invoke Leung’s “researched pedagogy” when writing that any pedagogical task should be assessed in terms of “its modes of implementation, its operation and its outcomes” (p. 1). The authors elaborate by stating that “pedagogy” needs to be based upon “systematic as well as enlightened observation” (p. 1).

The writers of this paper implemented parallel cycles of blogging and associated activities within four different English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and composition courses across four sequential levels during two semesters of one academic year at an English-language medium university in Japan. Each cycle included the following activities: (1) every student in each class set up a blog, (2) every student’s blog address was distributed to all other students in the

classes at each respective level via the teacher's blog site, a class wiki or a class moodle page, (3) every student worked at least half the semester with a "blogging buddy," a classmate/peer reviewer who would read the student's blog post before it was posted, (4) every student made at least one post on a specified theme to his or her blog every two weeks, (5) every student was also required to read and respond to at least three posts made by classmates during each biweekly cycle.

At the end of each semester, a survey was distributed to all participating students in order to gather data on student views toward the blogging experience. The four main topic areas of the survey were student attitudes toward writing, blogging as a classroom activity, doing peer reviews and being paired with blogging buddies. The purpose of the research was to gauge student interest in blogging and associated activities. After two semesters, that data was analyzed.

This paper provides a theoretical justification for the implementation of blogging and related activities within a university EAP and composition program. It also describes the design, operation and apparent benefits of those activities as they were implemented. Finally, it presents and interprets findings from the attitudinal survey of 145 student bloggers. This paper does not, however, investigate whether the use of blogging activities affects the quality of student writing.

Blogging: A pedagogical perspective

Blogs & blogging: Definitions

An Internet-based weblog, also known as a blog, is essentially a homepage managed by a writer. McIntosh (2005) expands this definition in the following way:

Historically, a weblog, or 'blog' for short, is recognised by its regularly updated, time and date stamped posts, running down the computer screen in chronologically reverse order (i.e. the most recent post comes first). Crucially, there is an 'Add Comment' feature so that readers of posts can leave their opinions, questions or thoughts. Finally, there is a writing style element: blogs are written by one individual who gives his or her thoughts in a generally relaxed, 'spoken' style (p. 2).

According to Williams & Jacobs (2004), "...Blogs' have evolved along similar lines to other forms of human communication in that they are a product of convenience rather than design" (p. 232). Lamshed, Berry, & Armstrong (2002) connect blogging with journal writing, stating that "like a journal, a blog can be a continually updated resource that grows over time with the accumulation of writing and other content. This archived information is accessed using a simple calendar that highlights the dates on which entries were made" (p. 9). These and various other researchers (Hiler, 2003; Thorne & Payne, 2005) have also recognized blogging as "a set of... phenomena" that has, since its inception as a manner of producing anything from online diaries to academic and reflective journals, emerged to have the capacity to "engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 232).

Principles in support of blogging activities

When the authors of this paper began teaching writing and integrated skills courses at various levels within an EAP/Composition program at a newly opened Japanese university where the main medium of instruction was English, a principal assumption was that for academic success the students needed to have opportunities to develop their computer- and language-based skills in tandem. Another assumption was that for optimal English language development, the students needed as many opportunities as possible to interact in the target language within their community of learners, and not just within the confines of the traditional classroom. This was due to the fact that the university itself was located in an isolated community in rural northern Japan, a setting where opportunities to interact with English speakers off campus was minimal.

Given these assumed requirements, one concern was discussed in the form of a question: What would be the most appropriate CALL activity available to supplement traditional paper-based reading and writing in our courses? Chapelle (2002) says that this question, restated as follows, is a recurring one: How can computer-assisted language learning (CALL) applications best serve the learner within the guiding parameters of current "research and practice in L2 pedagogy" (p. 498). Chapelle's suggested "principles for CALL pedagogues" include six requirements: (1) language learning potential, (2) learner fit (presenting tasks "appropriate to learners' linguistic ability level"), (3) meaning focus, (4) authenticity, (5) positive impact (resulting in "effects beyond its language learning potential"), and (6) practicality (pp. 499-500).

Similarly, based on the experiences of teachers surveyed worldwide, Warschauer & Whittaker (2002) have compiled a set of considerations for teachers planning to implement CALL tasks. Their suggested considerations include the following: (1) understanding of one's goals, (2) aiming for the integration of skills activities, (3) understanding the "complexity" of CALL tasks, (4) providing strong teacher support, and (5) involving learners in decision-making (pp. 368-371).

With these considerations and principles in mind, we selected blogging as the CALL activity that would best serve our students. This was done for a number of reasons. First, it was evident from our own experience and from an understanding of the prior research on blogs (Dieu, 2004; Downs, 2004; Glogoff, 2005; Lamshed, Berry, & Armstrong, 2002; McIntosh, 2005; Pinkman, 2005; Thorne & Payne, 2005; Warschauer & Whittaker, 2002; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) that blogging's popularity was growing rapidly, parallel to that of the Internet, and its potential in language teaching and learning was encouraging, though not fully known. In fact, on a global scale, according to Internet World Stats (n.d.) data for 2007, the number of Internet users in Asia is now approaching half a billion, while in North America and Europe the number is close to 600 million. Between 2000 and 2007 the growth in worldwide internet usage has been 250%. Concurrently, a BBC article (*Blogosphere sees healthy growth*, 2006), summarizing data from the blog tracking firm *Technorati*, puts the number of new blogs created daily at 100,000 and the number of posts made every day at 1.3 million. Murray (2007) states that as of October 2007 *Technorati* was tracking "more than 108.8 million

blogs" (p. 26). It is clear that many language learners in universities in the early 21st century are computer-proficient and enjoy working with computers. More recently, it has become evident that large numbers also maintain blogs in their first languages.

Research also suggests that educators help motivate students by using materials and implementing activities that students consider meaningful (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). As one of Pinkman's students wrote, "...once or twice a week I check my blog and then other students write comments for me, my motivation is up, usually teacher check my blog, so if I read teacher comments my teacher thought about me, my motivation up" (Pinkman, 2005, p. 20). Due to the popularity of computer and Internet technology and the growing interest in blogging, it was expected that our group of learners would also find the use of blogs in their English language study highly motivating.

Second, within our small university's steadily expanding student body (with an intake of about 150 students per year), almost every student seemed to own his/her own computer and every dormitory room on the campus where we taught had an internet connection; for students who did not have a computer, the university provided two 24-hour-access computer labs with 30 and 60 computers respectively. This availability of the required technology, we believed, would make any plans for course-based blogging practical within our educational context.

Related to the availability of computers and Internet connections was the fact that blogs are easy to create and maintain. There are a number of servers, blogger.com being one example, which offer free, simple to set-up, and convenient to use blogs (Kukana, 2005; Ray, 2005). Some of these are designed specifically for educational purposes, which generally means that there is no advertising. The blogger can quickly set up his/her own blog on one of these free web spaces, upload pictures, music and even video (from his/her own files or another web source) and then upload personal writing (known as a blog "post") and receive commentary from readers regarding each post that has been made.

With a blog set up and a list of classmates' blog addresses, the student blogger can post his/her own writing from any internet-connected computer and also access, read and comment on any classmate's post. Such activities can be done at a student's leisure, in a campus computer lab, a classroom, a dormitory room or an apartment, providing the maximum "versatility" and a broad "scope for interactivity" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 234-235).

Finally, for our curricular purposes, which were focused mainly on having students become engaged in the writing process within a broader, student-centered writing community, blogging stood out—in contrast to email, *MySpace* and *Facebook* messaging and online chat activities—as the CALL activity having the greatest pedagogical potential. Hall & Beggs (1998) contend that the main objective of teaching is to facilitate students becoming "legitimate producers of language within social groups both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 37). We recognized that in blogging, students do exactly that as they create written posts in the target language that are shared and can be commented upon with regard to various aspects, whether content, organization and/or usage, by classmates, the teacher and anyone else with the blog address.

In this way, blogging would seem to satisfy Chapelle's first and third principles for "language learning potential" and "meaning focus" (Chapelle, 2002, pp. 499-500). At the same time, blogging can be implemented in relation to other activities, ensuring integration of skills as well as fulfillment of Chapelle's second and fourth principles, those of "learner fit" and "authenticity" (p. 500). For example, within the composition courses of two of the writers of this paper, students were assigned to watch English-language films, some of which were for specific language learning purposes and others that had an additional thematic connection with course content. Students then would be asked to write film reviews that were to be posted on their blogs. In the next stage, classmates would leave feedback on those blog posts in the form of questions asked, observations made, and at times, ideas challenged. In this way, student participants, both the initial blog poster and each commentator, interacted via meaningful blog exchanges, or in what might be referred to as "blogalogues," a word coined by the writers of this paper. Williams & Jacobs (2004) explain the style of such exchanges in the following manner:

...it is not uncommon, over a period of time, for a distinctive style to emerge, in the course of writing entries and responding to feedback, that reflects the personal character of the blog's creator. Significantly, rather than alienate a readership by exposing one's personal traits and idiosyncrasies, this adds to the very popularity of a blog (p. 235).

As the discussion above demonstrates, a variety of features made blogging appear to be a good pedagogical "fit" for our program and for the students in our courses. Through systematic implementation and careful observation, we wanted to determine the degree to which this was the case.

The key elements of blogging

As mentioned earlier, the cycle of blogging activities that was implemented included students setting up blogs, collaborating with blogging buddies (some within an appointed group of classmates called "blogging groups," but others not), making blog posts, then reading classmates' post and commenting. The ease with which a student or any other blogger can set up a blog has been discussed in the section above. This section addresses blog posts, peer reviews and peer comments on blogs posts, blogging groups, and the blogging buddy method. It also includes a summary of the common aspects of blogging that were covered in our various sources.

Blog posts

At one time a recurring criticism of the use of blogs in education was that blogging students only write "trivia" (Downs, 2004). A major tenet of this paper is that, with well-structured activities and requirements directed by a classroom teacher, blogging activities and the associated technology provide the ideal forum not just for informal writing but also writing for academic purposes. While the

writers of this paper had various ways of implementing blogs and giving blogging assignments within their university-level language classes, the course syllabi were similar in several important ways.

First, the semester-length courses were arranged into content modules ranging from two to four weeks, during which time students were given blog post assignments that were fully integrated with other course activities. Before writing anything, students would read thematically related material, perhaps watch a popular or documentary video with content of a similar thematic focus, and discuss the content in class. Students would then use the content materials as a basis for doing narrowly focused paper-based writing tasks, such as question development and answers, idea outlines, and paraphrasing and summarizing exercises. Finally, each student would make a blog post in short essay form in response to a teacher-generated question or assigned task. Such assignments would usually be formulated so as to generate a clear student opinion (albeit one that required some recitation, analysis and/or synthesis of the thematic content). On occasion, the weekly or bi-weekly assigned blog task was more open-ended, with students generating their own topics related to the material, and then responding to those on their blog. The blog post was pitched to students in this way as providing them with an opportunity to express their opinion on some particular, often controversial aspect of the content. As Nardi et al. (2004) note, "Many bloggers emphasized they blogged to comment on topics they found pertinent and important. A blog, said one, can be 'a point of view, not just chatter'" (p. 44). On a cognitive development level, each blog assignment stood—along with paper-based essays—at the top of the schematic scaffold as a culmination of prior work.

Peer reviews

The teacher has been the traditional source of power in the second language classroom, particularly for the writing classroom. A student's paper is often corrected, commented on, and graded only by the teacher. Peer review activities diffuse some of that power, giving students a sense of responsibility and accomplishment both as readers and writers. Cho, Christian, & Charney (2006) note that, "Peer feedback appears to bring about a higher perception of meaning-change revision while most teacher influenced revisions happen at the surface level" (p. 270). Yang, Badger, & Yu (2006) found similarly that while peer feedback, as a supplement to teacher input, may have less influence on improved student writing, it seems to both impact development of writing skills and to increase learner autonomy.

Paper-based peer review activities usually involve pairs or small groups of three or four student writers exchanging copies of their papers and making comments based on a number of possible criteria (content focus, organization, language use, etc.). Such activities can be augmented in three ways with the use of blog-based peer review: peer comments on blog posts, blogging groups and the blogging buddy system.

Peer comments on blog posts

Blogging most significantly augments traditional paper-based activities when it provides students with the opportunity to participate in a meaningful, largely autonomous forum where they can exchange ideas, while practicing previously learned skills and developing new ones. For this reason, a strong follow-up activity to having students post writing on their blogs is to have their classmates read those posts and respond with comments, whether informal feedback or assessments based on pre-determined criteria.

In addition to posting a writing assignment on his/her blog, each student is required to read and respond to a set number of classmates' posts. As this peer commentator reads those posts and responds with his/her own viewpoints, sometimes in accordance with a classmate, and sometimes not, a number of written dialogues are initiated. This step underlies the notion of the blogging activity as a student-centered process, one in which "active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility" are central (Darabi, 2006, p. 53).

Ideally, each student writer would also return to his/her own post of any particular writing assignment, review the commentary left by classmates and then, if so motivated, leave them a response. A member of one blogging group notes that "a kind of reciprocity (was) expected because I read others' blogs, so I have to make my contribution" (Nardi et al. 2004, p. 45). In this way, the blog realizes the vision to "provide a forum that reaches beyond the scope of a university subject and which augments the knowledge creation occurring throughout a student's enrolment in a higher education program" (p. 11).

Blogging groups

Teachers with experience having students create blogs and make posts often state that it is difficult to insure that members of a class regularly and universally receive comments on their posts. From our experience it seems that if students are not provided enough guidance, they will gravitate and respond to the posts made by their friends. Under these conditions, in a class of 16, a popular student might receive comments from more than half of his/her classmates, while a quieter student close to none.

In answer to that challenge and in lieu of having to assign certain students to respond to others' posts, a teacher can create "blogging groups" within the class. A blogging group might consist of any number of students, but since the purpose is to narrow the field of potential peer respondents/commentators to a specific manageable group, it is best limited to no more than six members.

When blogging groups were utilized in our courses, they were created in groups of four to eight classmates, and members of each group were required to first respond to the posts of *at least* half of the members of the blogging group before responding to the posts of other classmates. This procedure creates a realistic chance for each blogging group member to receive multiple comments per post, while it also eliminates the common occurrence of student writers only reading and responding to posts by friends. Creating blogging groups is the equivalent of classroom management, only in this case, student interactions in

cyberspace are manipulated for greater inclusivity.

In addition to working with the posts of their blogging group members, students would also do other activities as a group, such as peer reviewing various homework exercises or carrying out content discussions. In this way, they could further cultivate a sense of meaningful social continuity with their group members.

Perhaps because of the fact that blogs are a relatively recent educational activity (Thorne & Payne, 2005), the literature does not seem to contain references to “blogging groups” as used herein, as subgroups of learners determined by the teacher who have a special responsibility to read and comment on the blogs of three or four classmates. While some might argue that the assigning of blogging groups compromises the autonomy of student bloggers, the benefits of full participation proved worthwhile in our context.

The blogging buddy method

Student writers developing skills in a non-native language need to be encouraged to write in that language as often as possible. Writing assignments for such developing writers tend to fall into one of two types: guided, teacher-directed, and accuracy-based work, such as structured paragraphs, strip stories, summaries, multi-draft essays and the like, or self-directed, fluency-based tasks, such as those often found in free writing and journals. Fluency writing is generally assigned as paper-based free writing or as journal-centered tasks. In those cases, the teacher generally does not have the time to comment extensively on every student’s paper. In addition, writing for an audience of one person (the teacher) may cause students to feel unmotivated over time. The challenge to teachers who utilize blogs for instructional purposes, especially when they are creating assignments aimed at providing students with opportunities similar to fluency writing tasks, is how to increase production without compromising quality. Felix has observed that, “Blogging opens up the possibility of regular peer assessment and breaks down the barriers of the four-walled classroom, helping achieve the aims of the 3rd millennial classroom: collaboration, inclusiveness, flexibility and bringing more relevance to learners” (cited in McIntosh, p. 6).

One way to address the issue of blog writing quality is with the blogging buddy system. The term “blogging buddy” refers to a student writer’s editing partner, the person who checks and comments on his/her blog post before it is posted. The blogging buddy is the initial peer reviewer, the first or final-draft reader, the one who acts as both the writer’s good conscience (useful for motivational purposes) and as his/her proofreader (in that way, also a surrogate teacher).

Regarding the blogging buddy’s role, there is no limit on how much or how little editing input or other commentary he/she provides for his/her partner (although this dictum can be adjusted according to class circumstances) as long as there is a concerted effort at review and response. In this way, the blogging buddy system is simple: It requires each student to present a piece of writing to his/her blogging buddy before it is posted.

Summary of common aspects of the blogging activities

The common aspects of the blogging activities in the eleven classes of the writers of this paper were as follows:

- 1) All blogging activities were assigned and not optional.
- 2) In addition to writing their own blogs, students were required to read and comment on classmates' blogs.
- 3) Every student had a blogging buddy, assigned by the teacher or chosen by the student.
- 4) Every student blogging buddy was encouraged to make any sort of comment necessary to improve his/her partner's writing. This was understood to include language usage and/or content/organization corrections.
- 5) Every student made blog posts for half of their respective course without utilizing the blogging buddy system, and then made posts for an equal length of course time utilizing the blogging buddy system.

Some variations on the application of the blogging buddy system in and among these eleven classes included 1) whether a student commented on peer papers by writing on a printed copy, or typing directly onto the computer, 2) whether blog posts and comments were made during class time or outside of class time, 3) whether the minimum length of each post was specified by the teacher or not, 4) whether students were assigned to a blogging group.

Surveying student perceptions of blogging and the "blogging buddy" method

Having implemented blogging and the associated activities mentioned above (i.e., the blogging buddy system, blogging groups and commenting on classmates' posts) for the first of two semesters, the authors looked to the students for input on the perceived effectiveness of the experience. This step also recalls the fifth principle of Warschauer & Whittaker (2002, p. 371): Soliciting student feedback on the CALL activities that have been implemented. It was in this context that a classroom-based research project was initiated, a survey instrument was developed and administered, and data collected.

The purpose of the attitudinal survey

The main purpose of this original research was to determine, in a pilot study format, how students perceived the use of blogs and the blogging buddy system. As mentioned earlier, there have been critics of the use of blogging in an academic setting, and some researchers (Mishne, 2006) have implied that the informal nature of blogs makes them not appropriate for academic work. Williams & Jacobs' study (2004) showed that students were "broadly in favour of the continued use of blogs as an effective aid to teaching and learning" (p. 11), but it also called for providing students with greater direction. Our goal was to assess the value of educational blogging by putting the question to our group of learners. Furthermore, while peer review is an established composition activity, its application via the "blogging buddy system" is an innovation that needed to be

researched. Hence, our preliminary step was to research student attitudes toward their blogging experience in general and toward the use of blogging buddies in specific.

As Williams & Jacobs (2004, pp. 3-4) note, "Surprisingly, there is not a lot of refereed published material on the subject of blogs in general, let alone work that focuses specifically on blogs in education." Thus, a final purpose was to contribute to this newly opened research area.

The participants

This research was conducted by surveying 145 students in eleven EAP and university composition courses at a recently-opened English-medium university in rural Japan. The surveys were conducted at the end of the Spring and Fall Semesters, 2006. Most student writers in this study were first- or second-year Japanese students, while several were third-year, and at least six were international students. About half the students were still in the EAP program, with paper-based TOEFL scores ranging from 460-499; the other participants were post-EAP program Composition (Freshman Composition or Research Writing) students, and thus had TOEFL scores of 500 or above (500 being a main requirement for exiting the EAP program and enough for students to be considered solid intermediate level). Of the 11 classes in this study, each participating EAP course met three times a week, 100 minutes per class, over the course of 15 weeks, while each composition course met twice a week for ninety minutes per class.

The survey instrument

In order to collect data, at the end of each term throughout the research period, the writers used the online survey program *SurveyMonkey.com*, available for free for small-scale surveys and with monthly fees for more professional features (www.surveymonkey.com). This program allows users to create an online questionnaire quickly by following simple procedures. Once one survey is created, the survey can be renamed as a new survey with the same questions for replication or with any revisions made for improvement.

After both the spring and fall semesters in the academic year of 2006, students took *surveymonkey* surveys; by the end of the academic year, 145 student writers had completed surveys regarding their attitudes toward writing, blogging, the blogging buddy system and commenting on classmates' posts. There were 35 items in total on the survey instrument, including four focusing on demographic information, 23 rating scale items focusing on degree of agreement in a Likert Scale format, six multiple choice questions, one yes/no question, and one question requiring a short answer response. Of the 31 non-demographic questions, four focused on writing in general, ten aimed to determine student attitudes toward blogging in general, while 17 aimed to determine student attitudes toward the blogging buddy system.

Selected findings of the attitudinal survey (see the questions in the attached appendix)

What follows is a review of the survey results for twelve of the degree of agreement statements. Overall, most students found the main blogging activities, including writing and uploading their blog posts and responding to classmates' posts, positive and useful. On item #8, for example, 81.4% of the respondents (118/145) chose "Strongly agree" or "Agree" for the statement that they liked blogging (see Figure 1). Similarly, on item #9, for the statement "I like posting writing assignments on my blog," 78% of the students (113/145) responded positively (see Figure 2). On item# 10, "I like reading my classmates' written posts," 93.1% (135/145) of the students expressed agreement. On item #11, for the statement "I like making comments on my classmates' posts," 80% (116/145) answered in agreement. For item #12, regarding the value of receiving

Figure 1

Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement: *I like blogging as an activity.*

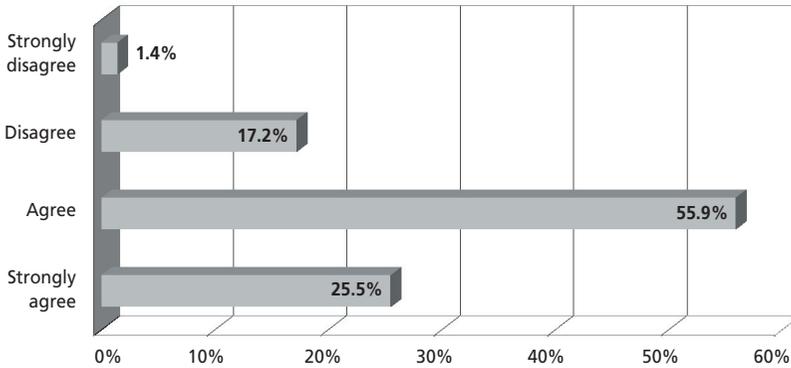


Figure 2

Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement: *I like posting writing assignments on my blog.*

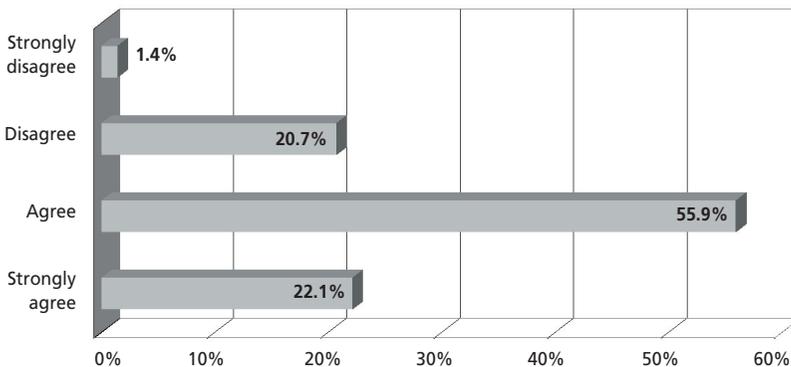
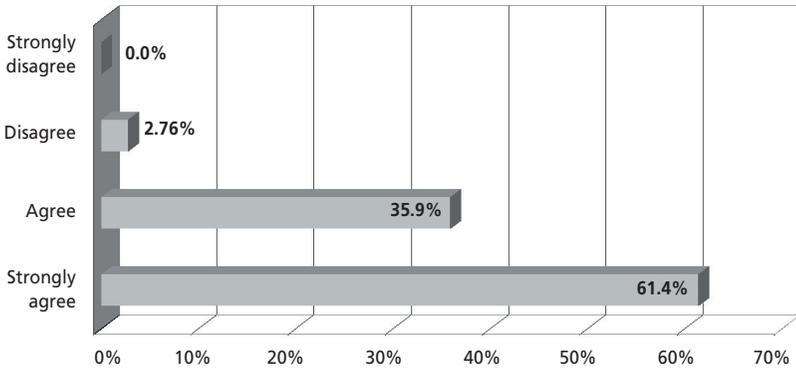
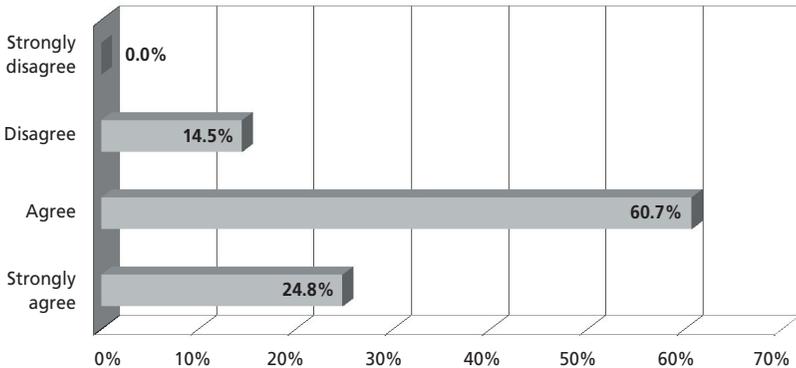


Figure 3

Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement: *I like having my classmates make comments on my blog.*

**Figure 4**

Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement: *Having a blogging buddy encourages me to write a better post.*

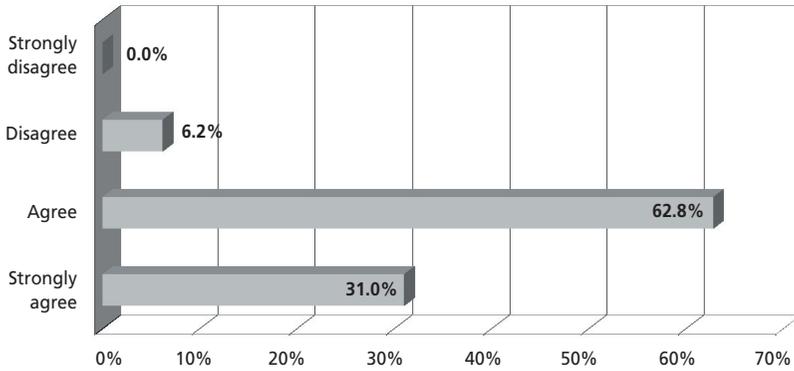


comments on posts from classmates, an impressive 97.3% positively responded (see Figure 3). Equally impressive was the response to item #13: 99% of the students (143/145) agreed that they liked having their instructor make written comments on a blog post.

The survey results also revealed that the blogging buddy system was viewed favorably by most students. 83% of the participants (120/145) answered "Strongly agree" or "Agree" to the statement of item #16: "I find the blogging buddy system useful." Item #17, that the blogging buddy system was effective for improving blog posts, got positive responses from 84.5% of the students (123/145). 85.5% of the students (124/145) answered positively for item #20: "Having a blogging buddy encourages me to write a better post" (see Figure 4). And for item #22, 91.7% of the students (133/145) agreed that having a blogging buddy read a post before posting was better than not having one do so. Finally, the positive value of working with blogging buddies for this group of students was corroborated by the

Figure 5

Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement: *In general, in order to improve my writing it is better to have a blogging buddy for my writing improvement than not to have one.*



following two items. In item #23, 93.8% of the students expressed agreement with the statement that “it is better to have a blogging buddy for my writing improvement than not to have one” (see Figure 5). For item #29, 96.5% (140/145) positively agreed with the statement that providing a blogging buddy with feedback on his/her post was a “positive learning experience”.

Discussion of the findings

The results of the survey given to the student participants are important for a number of reasons. First, it appears that within our classes the percentage of students who liked writing in general (82.4%) also liked blogging as an activity (81.4%). About the same percentage (78%) stated that they liked posting classroom assignments on their blogs. This seems to underscore the obvious: Students who like to write will probably like blogging, while students who do not like writing might not like blogging.

Second, the responses seem to indicate that whether students liked writing or not, they enjoyed reading what their classmates write (93.1%) and having their classmates read and comment on their own writing (97%). This again supports the notion of the blogging activity as a student-centered, peer-focused exercise (Chiddo, 2006; Glogoff, 2005). At the same time, students did not see the teacher as excluded from this process. In fact, since 100% indicated that they appreciated their teacher’s comments on blog posts, input from the teacher can still be considered vital within the context of these “blogalouges.”

Finally, from the survey results it seems clear that students truly appreciated the need to improve their writing and considered having an editor and being an editor valuable. While 85.5% expressed satisfaction with peer review activities in general, 93.8% indicated that having a blogging buddy was more effective for improving their writing than not having one. 96.6% also indicated that being a blogging buddy editor is a good learning experience.

Potential benefits for students

How might positive student perceptions of the blogging experience translate into greater production or higher quality writing? First, our experience and survey results show that nearly all the students were highly motivated by the blogging activities. Motivation has long been recognized as vital for language learning (Dornyei, 2003) and writing (Small, 1987). Students in this study seemed to be motivated in several ways. For one, they almost unanimously made their posts on schedule, even though a late post would not necessarily be graded down. Student punctuality in posting might have occurred due to the nature of blogging as a classroom activity. If a student did not finish writing a post on time, his/her blogging buddy would have been inconvenienced, having eventually to hurry giving feedback. Due to the public nature of blogging, if a post was not made on time, classmates/blogging group members could quickly see the identity of the one who was failing to participate and fulfill the assignment.

In a similar show of enthusiasm, students using blogs in the computer room during a class period were often found to stay well beyond the class's allotted time, a behavior that rarely occurs in a traditional classroom. This deep involvement in blogging and willingness to stay "beyond the bell" impressed all three writers of this paper.

Students also seemed to be motivated to write without a concern for word limits in their posts. Many posted not just as many words as the teachers had suggested—at least 200 words, when specified—but significantly more. Many of the students' posts, especially at the composition class level, were, in fact, short multi-paragraph essays. The explanation for this would seem to be that the overriding concern for the typical student was not just finishing an assignment but presenting one's ideas.

In addition, the blog posts seemed to serve as motivation for students to make specific improvements in content and organization and correcting careless mistakes. Some students were undoubtedly motivated by the fact that, while posted online, their writing was in essence published, and could be accessed and read by any number of classmates, the teacher, and indeed anyone around the world with an internet connection. Other students could have been influenced by having to have a blogging buddy check a submission before it could be posted. Several students even stated that because of the "public" nature of blogging, they felt more immediate responsibility for what they wrote, which would presumably lead them to do higher quality work.

Finally, students seemed highly motivated to give their classmates written feedback on their posts. Although for each assignment they were required to read and respond to the posts of only three classmates, most of them read the posts of many more than that, as was demonstrated by the fact that they would often comment on the posts of at least half the students in their respective classes. A few students actually read and commented on the posts of *all* their classmates. This seems to show that the students perceived the blogging activities not just as classroom exercises, but also as a meaningful and effective means of expressing their own ideas, learning about the ideas of others and responding appropriately.

At the same time, while the survey results certainly indicate that the students themselves perceived the various blogging activities positively, including partnering with a blogging buddy, it remains to be seen if this form of activity does in fact lead to improved content, organization, language use and/or mechanics.

Potential pitfalls of CALL blogging

One potential problem of using blogging activities is that blogs are not private, but public. By making blog writing and peer commentary available to everyone, students are at the same time denied privacy. A student who lacks confidence may feel fear at having others read his/her thoughts, or a student who has developmental writing problems may be embarrassed by the prospect of others seeing his/her mistakes.

There could also be the perceived problem of the political “correctness” of the thoughts that one puts on public display in a blog. One of the writers of this paper introduced blogging to upper intermediate level adult English students at a language school in Mandalay, Myanmar. While the students initially expressed a keen interest in the idea of blogging, their opinions changed after learning of the “public” nature of the activity. Eventually, they all declined to participate in an informally organized blogging project opportunity.

However, with eleven classes using blogging activities for this research, the privacy issue was not problematic, even with students from a society as highly private as Japan is often opined to be. In fact, often students wrote even more revealing descriptions of their inner feelings and struggles than expected. For example, one student, in a post entitled, “Love? I’m too young to tell it dude!!” wrote about how, in high school, he had felt he wasn’t loved by anyone. He ended his post noting, “Now I can say with no shame that I love my parents and my family. No matter what happens they are only family I have.” The post received four comments of encouragement.

As previously mentioned, the classes involved in this study also included a number of non-blog writing activities, including journals, free-writing, and essays, where students were able to write about issues not deemed appropriate for public scrutiny, if they were so inclined.

Conclusions and implications for future research

This paper has presented 1) a pedagogical perspective for blogging in English language teaching and learning; 2) a description of the experience of three teachers who designed and implemented blogging and associated blogging activities in EAP and post-EAP composition classes at an English-language medium university in Japan, and 3) feedback from 145 students in those classes. The feedback has been derived from an attitudinal survey of those students regarding their experience with a structured blogging regime, and in particular, with the “blogging buddy” system.

As demonstrated by the attitudinal survey data, the students responded positively to the blogging activities in general as well as to the blogging buddy

system. While over 80% of students stated that they enjoyed posting, reading their classmates' posts and making comments on those posts, they almost unanimously stated that they liked having their classmates and the teacher write comments on their posts. A large majority also found the blogging buddy system useful, motivational and effective for improving their writing.

Three features of the blogging activities seem to make them attractive and powerful curricular component for university-level English language classes: 1) their accessibility beyond the limits of the traditional classroom, 2) the personalized, student-centered nature of the interactions that they facilitate, and 3) their capacity for motivating students to work autonomously (whether alone, in pairs or small groups) to consider, produce and react to more content more frequently than a teacher might expect. These features combine to make blogging a highly productive, communicatively meaningful and effective approach to helping students refine and develop their language skills.

To follow up the current discussion, several areas of research can be considered. First, in the area of language acquisition, it would be advisable to analyze more methodically how student writing is impacted in quantity and quality thanks to the use of blogging and the blogging buddy system. In related research, the efficacy of the blogging buddy's commentary on grammar, content or organization should be examined. In addition, the manner in which a blogging buddy gives feedback, on paper, via e-mail or directly to the blogger, should be considered. For a more comprehensive view of how language learners view blogging, it would be worthwhile to implement blogging activities with other student populations and to survey other blog participants regarding their attitudes toward the same set of issues. It would also be of interest to conduct surveys of classroom bloggers to see whether or not they extend their communication via blogging or other media after courses end, thus continuing the "community." Finally, as other forms of e-learning (via self-access centers) and e-communication (i.e., *Facebook*) evolve, it would be of value to consider whether or not those could either utilize or be integrated positively with blogging activities.

Although the implementation of blogging and associated activities in our courses was carried out on a small scale and lacks the quantitative data to provide empirical support for blogging activities as being either more or less effective than traditional paper-based exercises in helping students to refine and develop their language skills, we can conclude that the blogging methods and activities presented do provide a motivating curricular addition for those students with internet access to have meaningful target language interactions outside the classroom.

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Appendix: Survey items rated on a Likert Scale and related to the present study

- Question 8: I like blogging as an activity.
- Question 9: I like posting writing assignments on my blog.
- Question 10: I like reading my classmates' written posts.
- Question 11: I like making comments on my classmates' posts.
- Question 12: I like having classmates make comments on my posts.
- Question 13: I like having my instructor make written comments on my post.
- Question 16: I find the blogging buddy system useful.
- Question 17: The use of the blogging buddy system is effective for improving my blog posts.
- Question 20: Having a blogging buddy encourages me to write a better post.
- Question 22: Having a blogging buddy read a post before posting is better than not having one do so.
- Question 23: In general, it is better to have a blogging buddy for my writing improvement than not having one.
- Question 29: Giving feedback on my blogging buddy's post is a positive learning experience.