The Use of Blogs in English Language Learning:
A Study of Student Perceptions

El uso de bitácoras o *blogs* en el aprendizaje del idioma inglés: un estudio sobre las percepciones del estudiante

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In this article we present an investigation that focused on the students' perception of using Blogs as a means to supplement in-class language learning activities. Blogs are easy to manage and enable students to publish their work in a chronological manner. They help students to engage in online exchanges and promote learner autonomy. This study evaluates a language laboratory program in which forty-two first year engineering students from a college in India were introduced to blogs and instructed to use them for recording their laboratory work. Data collection reveals that despite encountering some difficulties, students had an overall positive attitude towards using blogs in their learning of English. A follow-up study was conducted a year after the initial study and the results supported the original findings.

Key words: Computer assisted language learning, student perceptions, using blogs.

En este artículo presentamos una investigación enfocada en las percepciones de los estudiantes acerca del uso de *blogs* como un medio para complementar las actividades de la clase de idiomas. Los *blogs* son fáciles de usar y permiten a los estudiantes publicar sus trabajos cronológicamente. Ayudan a los estudiantes a involucrarse en intercambios en línea y promueven el aprendizaje autónomo. Este estudio evalúa un programa de laboratorio de lengua en el cual cuarenta y dos estudiantes del primer año de ingeniería de una universidad de India, a quienes se les familiarizó con los *blogs* y se les instruyó en la forma de usarlos para documentar su trabajo en el laboratorio. Los datos recolectados muestran que a pesar de enfrentar algunas dificultades, los estudiantes tuvieron una actitud positiva acerca del uso de *blogs* en su aprendizaje de inglés. Se realizó un estudio de seguimiento un año después del estudio original y los resultados sustentaron los primeros hallazgos.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje del idioma asistido por computador, percepciones de los estudiantes, uso de *blogs*.

Introduction

The "talk and chalk" method has a long history in language teaching, but the time has come to introduce available cutting-edge technologies in language teaching. They will bring about a transformation in the existing traditional education model by promoting active learning in students and will enable students to move from an emphasis on knowledge memorization to knowledge application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Innovations in teaching methodologies have been supported by the development of increasingly sophisticated but user-friendly technologies and one of them is blogs. They have fundamentally transformed the way people interact on the Internet. They have changed users from consumers to contributors of information. A blog (short for weblog) is a frequently updated website that often resembles an online journal. It is 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 World Wide Web (www). It is almost as easy as sending an e-mail (Stanley, 2005).

Entries are posted chronologically, with the most recent at the top, and provide commentary or news on a particular subject. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic.

A blog is a viable option when a public space is required to display the students' work or where students can share experiences, opinions or creations that reflect the best of their learning.

The present article reports on a classroom-based research project where blogs were integrated into language courses at a college of engineering in India. It describes the study and examines the participants' perception of the learning experiences afforded by blogs as a means to supplement in-class language learning activities.

On the Educational Value of Technology

Blogs have been well received in education because of their multimedia features, simple web publishing, interactivity, and ability to support cooperative and autonomous learning. Bloggers can read other blogs, give their comments on them, and refer to them in their own blogs. The worldwide blog audience enables students to interact with and have their work viewed by others outside the classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Warlick, 2005).

Several studies have lent support to the assertion that blogs can effectively facilitate language teaching and learning (Betts & Glogoff, 2005; Bloch, 2004), especially in terms of learners' language complexity, grammatical correctness, and fluency. In addition, bloggers tend to have a greater sense of freedom to express their ideas and to establish their arguments than classroom-based participants (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Bloch, 2004). Blogs enhance users' exposure to people from different backgrounds and circumstances (Baggetun & Watson, 2006; Richardson, 2006). The archiving of blog entries facilitates users' reflection on blog content and fosters development of metacognitive strategies for monitoring the progress of learning on the blog (Richardson, 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2004).

While traditional websites usually contain a static, limited scope of content, blogs with Really Simple Syndication (RSS) present readers with diverse ideas, questions, and links and, thereby, help develop collective intelligence (Richardson, 2006; Warlick, 2005). RSS is a family of web feed formats which publish frequently updated works —such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video— in a standardized format. Web feeds benefit publishers by letting them syndicate content automatically. They benefit readers who want to subscribe to timely updates from favored websites (Wikipedia).

Chapelle recommended six criteria for Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) task appropriateness based on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) findings: (1) language learning potential, (2) learner fitness (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 (2002, pp. 499-500).

Similarly, based on the experiences of a worldwide teacher survey, 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, the researcher selected blogging as the CALL activity that would best serve the 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 has grown rapidly, parallel to that of the Internet, and its potential in language teaching and learning has been encouraging, though not fully known. In fact, on a global scale and 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 was 250%. Concurrently, articles in BBC (Blogosphere sees healthy growth, 2006), summarizing data from the blog tracking firm Technorati[1], puts the number of new blogs created daily at 100,000 and the number of posts posted 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); and BBC's another article (Children who use technology are 'better writers', 2009), states that children who blog texts or use social networking websites are more confident about their writing skills. "Our research suggests a strong correlation between kids using technology and wider patterns of reading and writing," Jonathan Douglas, Director of the National Literacy Trust, told BBC News. He added that engagement with online technology drives their enthusiasm for writing short stories, letters, song lyrics or diaries.

Research also suggests that educators help motivate students by using materials and implementing activities that students consider meaningful (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan 2002). So when students upload their posts on their blogs, creating their own space on the web, and receive comments and feedback from their peers and teachers, they feel highly motivated. 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" (quoted in Blackstone, 2007, p. 5). Due to the popularity of computer and Internet technology and the growing interest in blogging, it was expected that the group of learners would also find the use of blogs in their English language study highly motivating.

Second, almost every student of the college where the study was conducted owns a computer/laptop and the campus has WiFi internet connection;

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1   http://technorati.com/state-of-the-blogosphere/

for students who do not have a computer, the college provides two 24-hour-access computer centres with 30 and 40 computers respectively. This availability of the required technology, the researcher believes, would make any plans for course-based blogging practical within the 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. 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, presentations, 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 (Blackstone, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

Research on the effect of blogs on education is still in its infancy, and the effect of blogs on language learning and teaching has been studied even less. A review of the literature reveals that no such study on blogs even exists in India. The purpose of this study is to report on the integration of class blogs into language courses and to examine the participants' perception of the learning experiences afforded by blogs.

In this regard, the researcher designed a project to introduce students to blogs and to find ways to use blogs to supplement their learning experience. The overall purpose of this study was to investigate how students perceived learning English through blogs.

Participants and Context

The participants were 42 first-year college students, taught by the teacher-researcher, in two laboratory classes at an engineering college in India.

Both classes were relatively large: 20 and 22 students respectively. Of the 42 students, 14 were female and 28 were male. The students' average age was 19.67 years. They were placed at the high-beginner level in language ability and had received at least ten years of formal instruction in the English language. At the time of this research project, they were taking a compulsory Communication Skills course. This project was implemented in the students' communication skills practical laboratory course, which aims to enable students to use language sub-skills effectively. They were majoring in a variety of technical disciplines, such as electronics, mechanical engineering, information technology, and computer sciences. These students tended to have relatively little exposure to English in their content-based classes.

The researcher conducted a survey of the students' online experience and habits prior to the study and found that 37 students out of 42 (88%) possess a personal computer (a desktop or a laptop). Most of the students, 63.8% to be precise, reported that they work online through home computers more often than through college facilities, such as the computer centre, the library or the digital language laboratory. Data on how often the students got online revealed that 68.8% of the students got on line between one and seven times a week, and 26.5% of them got online more than seven times a week. 55.3% of the students reported spending between one and two hours on the Internet. The data collected suggested that many of them frequently spent a considerable amount of time online. However, regardless of their ample online experience, none of the students owned a blog and many might not be even familiar with blogs.

Procedure

During the last week of January 2007, the students were introduced to the digital language

laboratory, where access to the internet is available round the clock. Two practical groups comprised of 20 and 22 each were instructed to put the record of communication skills' class activities on their blogs rather than writing them up in their practical files. At the outset of the project, the groups were given a 50-minute training session at the laboratory on the use of blogs (creating their account, customising their blog, publishing their work, commenting on others blogs). The students worked in pairs on the computers in the digital laboratory. The training session aimed to introduce students to blogs so that learners could create their own blogs and afterwards post and publish the written assignments on them. Before the training session started, the students answered the survey questionnaire mentioned above, about their computer usage habits (experience using the web, frequency of web usage) and their familiarity with the latest web 2.0 tools offered by the World Wide Web.

A blog is called an online journal or a diary where every post is published chronologically; therefore, students used it to record their communication skills' class activities. After every performance in the language laboratory, students recorded their work on their blogs and uploaded relevant pictures, photographs, presentations and videos to make them more presentable, for one reason. Then, they also read their classmates' posts and wrote comments on them.

At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete an anonymous survey questionnaire concerning their perceptions of the experience. An interview was conducted with some of the students to gain a broader perspective on blogging processes.

The Survey Instrument

In order to collect data on the students' blogging experience, the researcher used the online survey program Surveymonkey.com, available for free for small-scale surveys (www.surveymonkey.com). This program allows users to create an online questionnaire quickly by following simple procedures. Once one survey is created, it can be renamed as a new survey with the same questions for replication or with revisions made for improvement.

At the end of the semester, the students answered the survey, which related to their attitudes toward writing their communication skill's practical record on blogs, commenting on classmates' posts, and the difficulties they encountered. There were 25 items in total on the survey instrument, including 4 focusing on demographic information, 16 rating scale items focusing on degree of agreement in a Likert Scale format where 1 stood for "strongly disagree" and 4 indicated "strongly agree", and 5 yes/no questions. Of the 21 non-demographic questions, 7 focused on the usefulness of blogs as a communication skills activity, 9 aimed to determine students' attitudes toward blogging (see Appendix) and 5 yes/no questions focused on students' difficulties while blogging.

Interviews

The purpose of the interview was to get a better insight into student's blogging processes. So, the teacher-researcher adopted stratified sampling[2] to "ensure the representative presence of particular subgroups of the population under study" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 120). In the initial phase of the interview, 12 students were selected. The criterion of selection was based on important demographic information such as, gender, year of study, blog performance, major and course grade. This sample method seemed to be more representative because of the limited sample size.

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2   The process of grouping members of the population into relatively homogeneous and mutually exclusive subgroups.

Then the researcher invited 6 students to participate in the interview who came from a different field of study (electronics, mechanical engineering, information technology, and computer sciences). Of the 6 interviewees, 2 were female and the other 4 were male. The interviews were conducted individually in the students' first language i.e., Punjabi. It allowed them to freely express their opinions and feelings. Each interview lasted for about an hour. The rationale for the interview was to elicit information relating to four major areas: (a) students' attitudes toward blogging as a language learning activity, (b) related learning strategies, (c) difficulties encountered, and (d) solutions to those difficulties.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is the self-reported nature of the data collection. Because the researcher is the teacher of the class, it is possible that the students might have over reported on the effectiveness of the program. One control for this limitation was the anonymous nature of the final survey questionnaire. The teacher also indicated to the class that she wanted to see how the class as a whole, not individual students, felt about the program.

The results of the study cannot be generalized to other populations as the sample was confined to only one class of engineering students in a college in India. The short duration of the study may also have negatively skewed the results obtained.

Results

The main purpose of this original research was to determine, in a pilot study format, how students perceive the use of blogs. There have been critics of the use of blogging in an academic setting, and some researchers have implied that the informal nature of blogs is not appropriate for academic work. A study conducted by Williams & Jacobs (2004) revealed 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. However, Williams & Jacobs (2004, pp. 3-4) surprisingly identified, "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". So, the researcher took the opportunity to address this lacuna.

Having implemented blogging for a semester, the researcher conducted a survey of the students' blogging experience. This step recalls the fifth principle of Warschauer & Whittaker (2002, p. 371): soliciting student feedback on the CALL activities that have been implemented. Table 1 contains the subscales of the survey.

Table 1. Subscales of the Blog Survey

Subscale	Description
Demographic details (Questions 1-4)	Age, gender, branch, semester.
Helpfulness and Usefulness of blogs (Questions 5-11)	Improvement in writing communication skills, business correspondence, self presentation, grammar, vocabulary and as a new way of social networking.
Attitude (Questions 12-20)	Blog-technology acceptance, perceived degree of motivation and confidence, and concern about the comprehensibility, quality, interest level, and popularity of blogs .
Difficulties and Problems encountered (Questions 20-25)	Typing problem, getting disconnected, computer equipment, copying others' work.

Participants' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Blogs

The participants' perceptions of the usefulness of blogs are discussed below. Of the perceived benefits of blogging, using blogs as a medium of self-expression received the highest score, followed by writing communication skills, information exchange, and social networking. Almost two-thirds (66.6%) of the participants responded positively towards improvement in their writing skills as a result of using blogs (see Figure 1). Additionally, 76% of the participants agreed to the statement that the blog is a medium of self-expression, out of which 57% "strongly agreed" on the same (Figure 2). In general, the results show that the participants prioritized the enhancement of communication skills.

Participants' Attitudes towards Blogging

Overall, most students found the main blogging activities, including writing and uploading their blog posts and responding to classmates' posts, positive and useful. For example, 80.9% of the respondents (34/42) chose "Strongly agree" or "Agree" for the statement that they liked blogging (see Figure 3). Similarly, for the statement, "I like posting writing assignments on my blog," 76% of the students (32/42) responded positively (see Figure 4). Responding to the statement, "I like reading my classmates' written posts," 92.8% (39/42) of the students expressed agreement (see Figure 5). Also, 66.6% (28/42) students answered in agreement for the statement, "I like making comments on my classmates' posts" (see Figure 6). Regarding the value of receiving comments on posts from classmates, 97.3% students responded positively. Equally impressive (99%) was the response of the students that they liked having their instructor make written comments on a blog post.
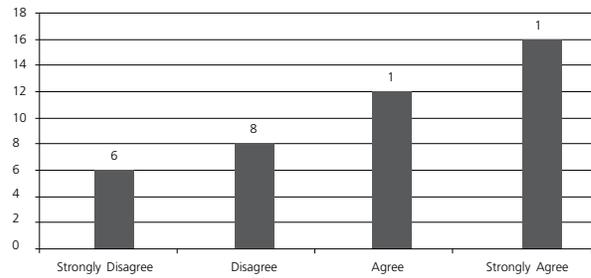
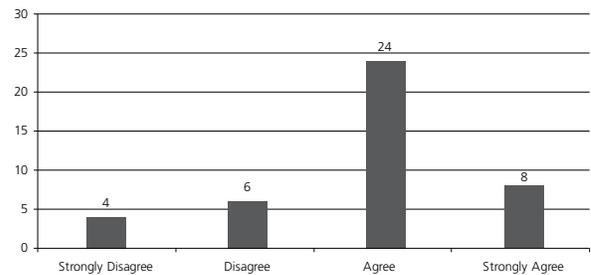**Figure 1.** Enhancement of Writing-Communication Skills
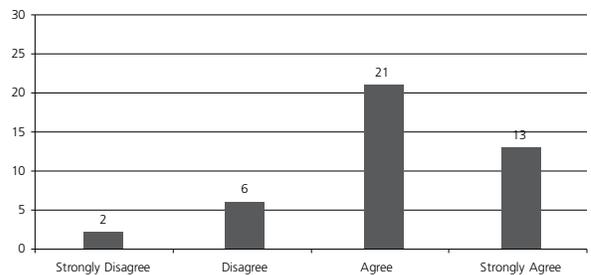
Figure 2. A Medium of Self-Presentation

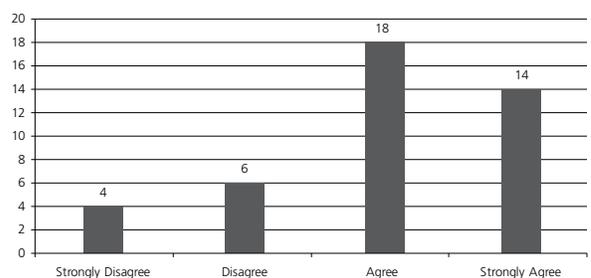**Figure 3.** I Like Blogging as a Communication Skills Activity

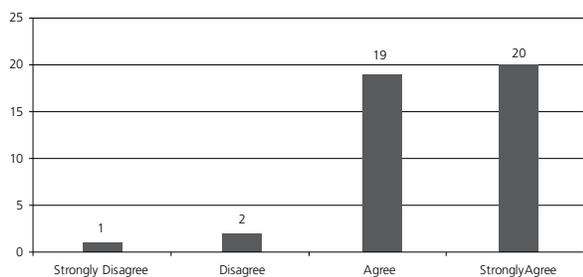**Figure 4.** I Like Posting Writing Assignments on My Blog

Figure 5. I Like Reading
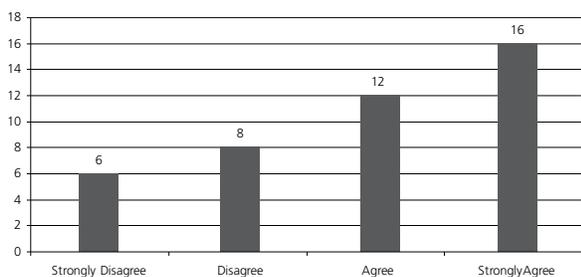My Classmates' Written Posts

Figure 6. I Like Making Comments
on My Classmates' Posts

Difficulties and Problems Encountered

Some students felt typing texts in the beginning of the semester for posting the blogs was a major hurdle. They found writing on a practical file much easier than typing. But they later on felt that it was important to learn typing skills as it would be very helpful for them in their profession. Some of them faced some technical problems like getting unconnected, slow uploading and power failure (see Table 2).

Students' Perceptions: Main findings

The results of the survey given to the student participants are important for a number of reasons. First, it appears that the percentage of students who liked writing in general also liked blogging as an activity. About the same percentage stated that they liked posting classroom assignments on their blogs. This seems to underscore that the students who like to write will probably like blogging, while students who do not like writing might not like blogging, but all of them liked uploading photographs, pictures, presentations and videos relevant to their assignments.

Second, the responses seem to indicate that whether students liked writing or not, they enjoyed reading what their classmates wrote (93.1%) and having their classmates read and comment on their own writing (97%). This again supports the idea of blogging activity as a student-centred, peer-focused exercise. At the same time, students did not see the teacher as excluded from this process. In fact, since all indicated that they appreciated their teacher's comments on blog posts, input from the teacher can still be considered vital within the context of the blogosphere.

In response to an interview question, one student explained his blogging experience as "Blogging is a wonderful experience. It has benefited us in many a way. Firstly, it was a good approach to make the students familiar with their oncoming activities. It also helped prevent wastage of time, paper & ink.

Table 2. Difficulties Encountered During the Program

Question	YES	NO
I had to spend too much time typing.	15	27
I got unconnected when uploading text, pictures or videos or presentations.	9	33
I did not have enough access to computer equipment.	3	39
I did not understand instructions on the blogs.	7	35
Others can easily copy my work.	16	26
N = 42		

It not only looks better than old bulky practical files but also helps to avoid silly, hand-breaking incidences caused due to writing by hand. But there are some loopholes too. Students can easily copy-paste another's material thus depriving the original author lose the credit he/she deserves. Well, I really loved blogging."

One of the students said, "just three clicks on the mouse and my views are open for world wide readership." Some mentioned the possibility of commenting on peer work as the best part of the blogs presented. Another mentioned that comment features allow interaction and peer review which help in developing their analytical skills, one of the important professional skills. So these views support the assertion made by Godwin-Jones (2003) and Warlick (2005) that, through blogging, students take ownership of the virtual space and the work they publish—an outcome that replaces traditional acts of passive information consumption by acts of active information creation.

Follow-up Study

A year after the previously described program, a follow-up study was conducted with the same group of students. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire with open-ended questions regarding their recollections of the program and the current status of their blogs.

Of the 41 responses we received, only 16 students reported ever going back to the blogs they created. This result seems to confirm the results obtained in the first questionnaire where the researcher found that the likelihood of students going back to their blogs is relatively low.

Three students reported accessing their blogs once every two or three weeks and also commenting on each other's works, photographs and experiences. They admitted liking the use of bogs. They found it "an interesting way to be in touch with

others' works and learn English." They continued using it only for six months, but then because of their course study and examinations they did not get time to access their blogs.

The main reason that the other 25 students did not go back to the websites was lack of time. Students said that they were too busy with their coursework; they didn't have enough time to post anything on their blogs and to give comments on other people's blogs. One possible interpretation of this finding is that students do not consider learning English a priority since they are into technical trades. The other possible interpretation is that students place work assigned by their teachers ahead of learning on their own. This interpretation is supported by three students' comments. They reported not having gone back to the blogs because they had "no pressure" from their teacher and she "did not give extra points." Interestingly, of those students who claimed they didn't have enough time, seven very reflective ones said they were probably "lazy" or "not aggressive enough" in their learning of English.

Another reason for not going back to blogs is related to the suitability of the blogs as a way to learn English. Some felt that there were other more effective and convenient ways to learn English such as using the language learning websites, TV, and magazines. Five students mentioned getting easily distracted by "more interesting stuff" when they surf or work on their blogs.

A third reason that students did not go back to blogs concerns equipment and bandwidth. Fourteen students reported not having easy access to computer equipment when they wanted to get online and some reported not having a high speed connection.

Twelve students mentioned forgetting the passwords of their blogs as a reason for not going back to them. This leads the researchers to believe that these students might not have been interested

enough in creating and maintaining their blogs or not interested enough in learning English.

A few students brought up not being used to getting online to learn as a reason for not using the blogs. They mean that they mainly use the Internet for other purposes such as e-mailing, chatting, and playing online games.

When asked about their recollections of the experience, most students said that it was a positive experience. Over twenty students appreciated the ease with which they could own web space in the form of a blog and instant publishing on the net.

Conclusions

In this paper, the researcher has made an attempt to give a pedagogical perspective of blogging in English language teaching and learning. The findings are based on the feedback received from 42 students of an undergraduate class of an engineering college in India. The feedback has been recorded from an attitudinal survey of the students regarding their experiences with structured blogging assignments. The survey demonstrates that the students responded positively to the blogging activities. While 33 students out of 42 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. The following features of blogging activities seem to make them an attractive and powerful curricular component for college-level English language classes: 1) Offers worldwide readership which is far beyond the limits of the traditional classroom, 2) Instant publishing on the Internet, 3) Creating an e-portfolio of students' work, and 4) Interaction and peer review through comments. These features combine to make blogging a highly productive, communicatively meaningful and effective approach to helping students refine

and develop their language skills. The follow-up study conducted one year after the program revealed that although only 16 students reported continued use of their blogs, all of them recalled their experience of blogging as a positive one.

Although the implementation of blogging and associated activities in the course 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 having meaningful target language interactions outside the classroom.

Pedagogical relevance is an important driving force that can both motivate students to undertake an activity and maintain their interest in it (Barr, 2004). Students in language courses would be more likely to engage in blogging if they felt that maintaining a regular target language blog could enhance their language proficiency or that improved blog-based performance could improve their course grade. Whatever the case, educators should make informed decisions regarding the extent of the integration of blogs with course content. For instance, should the blogs be central or a peripheral component of the course? Course design should take into account many blog-related issues. One such issue concerns whether or not teachers should assign specific topics to be addressed on blogs. Further research in this regard would be of interest to researchers and classroom teachers.

Research on the possible contributions of blogs to language learning is still in its teething stage. More research can help determine whether other factors such as gender, age, field of study, computer

literacy, and learner personality have a significant effect on the blogging process.

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Appendix: Survey Items Rated On a Likert Scale

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Branch:
4. Semester:
5. Blogging activities improve my Writing Skills.
6. Blogging activities improve my Reading Skills.
7. Blogging is a medium of self-presentation.
8. Blogging activities improve my grammar.
9. My vocabulary has increased due to blogging activities.
10. Blogging activities will help on my professional floor.
11. Blogging is a new way of social networking.
12. I like blogging as a language laboratory activity.
13. I like posting writing assignments on my blog.
14. I like reading my classmates' written posts.
15. I like making comments on my classmates' posts.
16. I like having classmates make comments on my posts.
17. I like having my instructor make written comments on my post.
18. In general, blogging motivates me to complete practical writing assignments on time.
19. Positive comments from my teacher and classmates enhance my confidence level.
20. I like to upload quality posts because of worldwide readership of blogs.
21. I had to spend too much time in typing.
22. I got disconnected when uploading text, pictures or videos or presentations.
23. I did not have enough access to computer equipment.
24. I did not understand instructions on the blogs.
25. Others can easily copy my work.