A Case Study: Implementing Class Blog as a Learning Tool in English Language Teaching[*]

Nurgül ÇAKIR KAYIŞOĞLU[1]
Hülya YUMRU[2]

Abstract

This is the age of technology. We have been witnessing the integration of technology into every aspect of our lives and education is no exception. Many studies conducted in language teaching and learning area show us that implementing technological applications into traditional classes have considerable benefits and help both teachers and students deal with the challenges they confront in learning and teaching processes. Since our students were born in a digital world, their perceptions toward learning dynamics are not similar to the ones we have. Because now they use technological tools and the internet in their daily lives to do almost anything, they also use the internet and technological devices for their educational needs. Thus, educators should be involved in their students' digital, technological world to help them learn effectively. With the aim to shed light on changing learning and teaching dynamics, this study was conducted to search for the benefits and challenges of using a class blog as a learning tool in English language teaching. Fifteen eleventh grade students participated in the study. The data collection instruments of the study were pre and post tests and the field notes taken during the class blog implementation. The study suggests that the practice of class blog be an effective learning and teaching tool. It was revealed that the class blog implementation enabled the students to be more independent learners who are more motivated to take the responsibility of their learning. Thanks to the interactive feature of blogs the students had greater authentic communication opportunities by the help of which they had the chance to perform more fruitful group and pair activities compared to the ones performed in traditional classroom environments in which they had a rather limited context. It could be said that the students were able to develop their language learning strategies by making use of multiple language skills simultaneously.

Keywords: Use of technology in teaching English, Using a class blog as a language learning tool, Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Bir vaka çalışması: İngilizce Öğretiminde Bir Araç Olarak Sınıf Bloğu Uygulamasının Kullanılması

Öz

Teknoloji çağı içerisindeyiz. Teknolojinin hayatımızın her alanında yer aldığına şahit oluyoruz ve eğitim bir istisna olamaz. İngilizce öğrenmek ve öğretmek üzerine yapılmış birçok çalışma bize göstermektedir ki geleneksel sınıf uygulamalarının içerisine teknolojiyi entegre etmenin birçok faydaları vardır ve öğretme ve öğrenme süreçlerinde hem öğretmenlerin hem de öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları güçlükler konusunda faydalanmasını sağlamaktadır. Günümüzde öğrenciler dijital bir dünyaya doğduklarından, onların öğrenme dinamiklerine karşı algıları bizimkilere göre farklılık göstermektedir. Çünkü onlar artık günümüzde günlük hayatlarında hemen her şeyi yapmak için teknolojik araçları ve interneti kullanmaktalar. Aynı zamanda teknolojik araçları ve interneti eğitim ihtiyaçları için de kullanmaktalar. Bu sebepten dolayı etkili bir öğretim sağlayabilmeleri için eğitmenlerin, öğrencilerinin dijital, teknolojik dünyalarına adapte olmaları gerekmektedir. Değişen öğrenme ve öğretme dinamiklerine ışık tutabilmek amacıyla, söz konusu çalışma, İngilizce dili öğretiminde sınıf bloğu kullanmanın fayda ve zorluklarını araştırmak için gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın katılımcıları on beş adet on birinci sınıf öğrencisidir. Çalışmanın veri toplama araçları; ön ve son testler ile araştırmacının uygulama esnasındaki gözlemlerine dayanan saha notlarıdır. Çalışma, sınıf bloğu uygulamasının etkili bir İngilizce öğretme ve öğrenme aracı olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Yine çalışma sonunda varılan kanılardan bir tanesi de sınıf bloğu uygulamalarının öğrencilere daha bağımsız bir şekilde öğrenme imkânını sağlayarak kendi öğrenme sorumluluklarını üzerlerine alma konusunda daha fazla motive ettiğidir. Klasik sınıf uygulamalarının nispeten daha kısıtlı bir ortam sunması sebebiyle, sınıf bloğu uygulamalarının entegre edilmesiyle blogların etkileşimsel özelliği sayesinde öğrenciler daha özgün iletişim imkânlarına sahip olmuşlar ve bunun sayesinde daha verimli grup çalışmaları gerçekleştirmişlerdir. Böylelikle, öğrenciler öğrenme becerilerinin hepsini aynı anda kullanma imkânına sahip olarak, dil öğrenme stratejilerini geliştirebilmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce öğretiminde teknoloji kullanımı, Sınıf bloğunun öğrenme aracı olarak kullanımı, İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretimi.

INTRODUCTION

Every time period in history comes with its own demands. From the point of education in our age those demands are mainly related to the internet, social media and the advantages they offer considering language learning and teaching. Thus, we have started to hear the term of 'instructional technology' which was defined by Belderrain (2006) as integrating technology into education. In previous times the classroom and the education items consisted of blackboards, books, notebooks, maybe some audio and video players and a teacher. It will not seem strange when it is said the books and blackboards and other physical items are replaced by silver screens of PCs, tablets or smart phones, but even most of the functions of teachers have been started to be replaced by those smart machines and their virtual applications. When

we consider students, now we have more independent learners who possess more freedom to make decisions about their own learning, as they are aware that the whole world of information is at the tip of their finger and only a click away. We, as educators cannot ignore this huge difference in understanding of the contemporary learners than the typical ones before technology and internet generation. They learn differently, they actually demand to learn differently than we think so. They are in a constant interaction with their peers and literally with the world. They communicate, get feedback, make their own decisions by thinking critically to eliminate the endless flow of information coming via internet. That is why the path we are to follow to educate our students should be in line with their new age path so that we can be side to side with them to facilitate their learning processes. We should also admit that from now on, teachers should be more invisible which means that they will of course be there but not as the ones who should take most of the actions but as the ones who should lead their students to take action for their learning processes in which they should be actively involved. In other words, teachers' time should be minimized whereas students' time should be maximized in the new teaching and learning processes because of the new demands of the new age. They should be active learners but not the passive ones who just sit to be spoon fed by the teacher as in the past. When an English teacher takes all these facts into consideration, he/she might end up with the idea of implementing a class blog as a language learning tool. Grami (2012) stated after conducting a class blog implementation research that the students enhanced their writing skills thanks to the feedback they got from their peers and they also improved their critical thinking skills. Soares (2008) reported that the students' attitudes towards the class blog as a language learning tool were highly positive which was motivative to learn the language.

There are considerable amount of research done in the field showing that blogs seem to offer many advantages most of which are the 'must have' factors such as communication, interactivity, creative language usage, experiencing new language forms, active involvement, group work, peer learning, getting and giving feedback, authentic context, the state of being beyond the boundaries of classroom walls.

As the need of self-expression is a strong feeling among the new generation students, one more important thing that makes blogs a desirable tool is that all students might express themselves freely in that context whereas they have limited chances of this opportunity due to limited class hours and crowded classrooms. Godwin & Jones (2003) stated that if learners have the opportunity to express themselves to the real-audience they become more motivated and interested. Keller (2008) pointed out that motivation is important for students to engage in learning activities and added that gaining students' attention and building their curiosity are the key factors. If new language learning tools cannot be integrated into these new contexts, the teaching method will turn into something too traditional towards which the students nowadays may lose their interests for the lessons and cannot benefit that much anymore. In that case, if we are to implement a class blog as a language learning tool to cope with the needs of our modern age students, what should we expect as a result according to the literature? As an answer to this question it can be said that blogs seem to offer many advantages for practicing language by developing skills of all types because they provide

students with communication by active involvement, cooperative studies which will be helpful for peer learning enabling them getting feedback from each other and an authentic context. In this way, they will find chances of experiencing new language forms and more opportunities of being exposed to the language.

Among several different types of educational blogs such as learner blogs and tutor blogs, class blog implementations seem more suitable to make benefit for both inside and outside class application. Class blogs also appear to be more convenient to integrate into the curriculum. Because this kind of blogs may serve as a joint digital notebook to which both the teacher and all of the participants contribute simultaneously and in which they give immediate feedback to one another, be in integration and communication using written, spoken, audio and visual methods. Students keep the records of their studies in their class blogs, and everybody has access to them which performs as portfolios thanks to which the students may have the chance of reflecting on their studies.

It is certain that there should be new tools to teach a second or a foreign language in today's world because of the changing needs of the learners. So, trying to understand the dynamics of implementing a technological tool to the traditional classroom environments, this study aimed to provide an insight into the benefits and challenges of using a class blog as a learning tool to teach English and examined several angles of using a class blog as English language learning tool. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Are there any benefits in implementing a class blog in English language teaching? If so, what are those benefits?
2. Are there any challenges in implementing a class blog in English language teaching? If so, what are those challenges?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was designed as an action study which was conducted to have an idea about the solutions and learn more about the educational problems emerged in the learning processes. In other words, it could be named as a case study which is a research method in which a certain subject is examined in its natural context. The study was conducted in eight weeks of time. The participants consisted of fifteen female and male non-native English language students Who were studying at Fatsa Anatolian high school in Ordu, Turkey. The students were eleventh grade high school students within the age range of 15-17. The researcher applied four data gathering instruments in the study:

1- Writing pre-test: The researcher made the students write a paragraph about the advantages and disadvantages of social media, before starting the study to get an idea about the students' understandings about using social media to make better implications.

2- Pre-study interview: The aim of this interview was to gather information about the participants in relation to their familiarity with technology and their computer skills. Each student was given a paper on which the pre-study interview questions were written. The questions were examined by making categorizations to provide a coherent narrative in order to have an overall understanding for each of the answers. After they answered the questions, a short conversation was held on how they were feeling about the study they were to participate in to give the researcher an opinion about the before and after phase of the study.

3- Semi-structured interviews: The researcher conducted these interviews with five of the students on weekly basis to elicit their reflections on the benefits and challenges of using the class blog and to have an overall idea of the thoughts of the students about class blog implementation procedures as a language learning tool. The semi-structured interviews were done at the end of each week with five randomly chosen students who answered five semi-structured interview questions to help the researcher see the changing attitudes, feelings and behaviours of the students.

4- Researcher's field notes: The researcher kept field notes to record her observations and reflections regarding the implementation of the class blog throughout the eight-week of process to understand how the students reacted to the activities, what worked well and what didn't.

Unlike the studies previously conducted on using blogs as an educational tool, the present study tries to shed light on another aspect of using blogs. This study examines the implementation of a class blog as a language learning tool by carrying out the activities which are in the students' text books prepared according to the curriculum. The students followed the topics and the language activities through their class blog by publishing their written, spoken and visual posts.

The students were shown how to design their own class blog. It was set up on a free blogging platform. They were asked to write their blog entries and comment on each other's posts. The students were able to use any kind of format as a blog-post. It could be a video that they had recorded related to the weekly subject, a picture which they gave the definition of, a text, a composition. The students were assessed at the end of each week in accordance with the content of their blog entries. Each week's task was in line with the topics, vocabulary and language structures of the units in the course book which was designed according to the curriculum of the high schools in Turkey. It can be said that the students re-created the activities which were originally in their text books. In other words, they re-created a digital copy of their text book to which each student contributed. For example, if the topic was tourism and there was one reading passage in their text books, the students constructed their own reading passages, videos or other types of blog posts related to the topic "tourism." While preparing their tasks students were encouraged to use the structures they had been learning in that specific week of the study. The steps to be taken in the study were followed in accordance with the syllabus. The data of the study was subjected to descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS

The students were interviewed throughout eight weeks by asking five questions as semi-structured interviews to elicit their reflections on the benefits and challenges of using class blog as a language learning tool. The first question was 'Which activity was your favourite? Explain why?' The answers of the students revealed that they enjoyed all of the activities they did to post on the class blog. Most of them said they both had fun and learned while searching the net for the topic. The idea of sharing and seeing each other's works and being able to comment on the posts made them excited. They admitted that when the classes are integrated into this virtuality they learned better because that is the world, they have been living in.

The second question asked was 'What did you find difficult this week?' The majority of the students answered this question reporting that nothing was difficult because the blogging process seemed familiar to the students and they enjoyed them as they are engaged in similar activities in their daily lives. A few students admitted that they had difficulties when they tried to express themselves in English, but this was mainly because of their unfamiliarity with those kinds of activities.

The third question asked was 'Do you have any ideas to eliminate those difficulties?'. Some students put forward some ideas even if they had said there were not any difficulties at all. The more they had to interact with their peers, the more they realized that they had limited vocabulary knowledge and they had some pronunciation problems with new and the previously learned vocabulary items. So, their idea was studying and trying to learn more. This can be accepted as motivation to learn the language enhanced thanks to the blogging activities.

The fourth question asked was 'Do you encounter any problems in the process of blogging?' They reported that there were no problems except for the limited class hours. They said two hours of English lesson was not enough for anything. They said that they wanted to do more research on the subject; they needed more time to prepare their blog posts, and they also needed more time to communicate with their friends in the target language to share their ideas or perform group or pair work activities.

The fifth question asked was 'Did you enjoy blogging as part of your learning process? If yes, why? If no, why?'. All of the answers given to this question showed a satisfaction towards the blogging activities as a language learning tool. In the first week of the study one student said: 'I had fun, because I communicated with my friends and I both have fun and improve my English. In the second week another student remarked that 'Yes, it is instructive. It enables young people learn by being social. Another one said: 'I did learn fresh things.' The similar positive remarks by the students continued throughout the weeks such as 'Yes exactly I did enjoy and learn. It is more enjoyable writing a blog rather than writing on our notebooks.' 'Yes, I enjoyed a lot. I learned new information, new vocabulary and new structures when I looked at the blog posts.' In the last three weeks their answers became more specific about their learning process. In the sixth week one student said; 'Yes exactly. Because we learned

together from one another which was fun.' Another answer was 'I learned new vocabulary and got better making correct English sentences.' In the last two weeks some of the answers were 'Yes I learned. Before blogging I was not studying in this way.' 'I really love blogging. It Works.' As it could be seen from the students' answers, all of them found blogging activities beneficial from the point of learning English. All of them agreed that they learned English better and in an enjoyable manner and that they felt the relaxing freedom to do their own research about each week's topic. This could indicate that they started to become autonomous learners while preparing their posts for the class blog. They reported that they enjoyed the study as they had the chance to learn something from their classmates which enabled them to get immediate feedbacks. In this way, they all got involved in group or pair work which had an importance having conversations among themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

The world is rapidly changing. Neither students nor teachers are the same as the ones in the traditional world before the technological improvements. Today's teachers may feel comfortable using traditional teaching methods, but the learners are not traditional anymore. They are millennials. Not only the learners but all of us are surrounded by a web-based environment in which we are living our lives through technological devices and software. Technology means everything in our lives. So, it is impossible not to see the advantages of using it in foreign language education. It will also be comfortable for the learners because

In the light of the latest developments, language teachers attempt to investigate new technologies to integrate into their lessons in order to have better results to fit in the needs of new generation technologically raised student. Research done on foreign language teaching has presented us a lot of examples showing that using technology in teaching languages has a positive effect on students' learning.

One of the ways to integrate technology into language education is weblogs or blogs. Blogs are welcomed warmly in education because they are user friendly, and they address the learning needs of contemporary students such as active, autonomous and cooperative learning, critical thinking, improving problem solving skills, multi-media sport, interaction, communication and expressing themselves. Thus, it could be said that blogs have great potentials as instructional tools in language teaching and learning.

In literature blogs are categorized according to their functions and contents. This study examined the implementation of a class blog as a language learning tool, by carrying out the activities, which are in their text book prepared according to the curriculum, into the class blog as a blog task. It functioned as an extension of the classroom dynamics. The students followed the topics and language activities through their class blog by publishing their written, spoken and visual posts. Their tasks were not just reading the text book and performing the activities which are mostly done by writing on their notebooks and just keeping those for just themselves afterwards. Since the class blog enabled them to vary the tasks they were going to prepare, they performed the activities in many forms by writing essays, sending visuals or sharing videos they recorded about the week's topic. It can be said

that the class blog had a function of a joint notebook which everybody had one exact same copy by the help of which all of the students had an access of every record on it and get the necessary feedback showing their progress, weaknesses and strengths providing an atmosphere of sharing ideas and enabling peer learning.

The study revealed that the students both enjoyed the class blog activities and improved their skills better than the classes in which they do not use the class blog. Since the students are already used to learning English using social media, they felt comfortable to share something in English while carrying out their tasks in their class blog. Most of the students reported that it was beneficial to follow the curriculum through their class blog because they had the opportunity to interact with their friends continuously and in this way, they learned a lot from each other. On the class blog everything was open to everyone, which enabled them to be in interaction with all of the mates and help each other see different point of views and get feedback. As the time progressed thanks to the interactional context of the class blog, the students seemed to build up a community in which they could communicate in English and contribute to each other's language development. Moreover, it can be assumed that class blog may create an alternative authentic atmosphere for learners to improve their main and sub language learning skills.

Lee (2011) states that blogging enhances autonomous learning providing self-regulation and control. According to Benson (2011), the students who are not capable of being autonomous can develop it, and if a learner learns a language autonomously the results will certainly be better. The students carried out their own research about the week's topic while preparing their blog posts, and they reported as an autonomous activity, searching the net for their topics helped them learn new expressions and vocabulary. Given certain tasks to be completed at a certain time period, the students were able to decide their own learning needs, and they successfully chose the best ways to follow to reach better outcomes by assessing their own learning processes. Since the students knew that they were publishing their written, visual or audio-visual posts for the real audience, they were more careful about their posts, which caused them to take on more responsibility for their own learning. Thus, these findings may indicate that implementing a class blog might help to enhance learner autonomy.

All of the students stated that their motivation levels never decreased during the study because they found blogging activities more enjoyable than conventional class activities. They felt motivated in terms of sharing their ideas and having the chance of expressing themselves through publishing their posts which they admitted that it kept them alert.

Zwalinski (2009) suggests that blogs are beneficial for students to improve their communication skills and work in collaboration. Hsu and Wang (2010) have reported that when using blogs students may develop a sense of community in which they develop social interaction and their communicational skills by getting in touch with the real audience.
It was observed that they were constantly in a certain collaborative work while searching the net for their weekly tasks. It could be said that the students were also able to develop 'a sense of community' which most of the educators find beneficial for students to learn better, and in

which they were eager to support each other. All in all, class blog activities allowed the students to interact more due to collaborative atmosphere of it.

Ward (2004) points out that while students are writing something on the blog, they should read it as well or they should read their friends' comments or reflections and in this way their reading and writing skills improve engaging in an authentic context at the same time. Oravec (2002) reported that implementing blogging activities in classrooms may enhance students' critical and analytical thinking skills. The students were actively using the four basic language skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing- before, after and during they were preparing their blog posts. As they developed a kind of community in which they study for their tasks collaboratively, they had the chance to make use of all four basic language skills simultaneously. They searched for the topics and asked questions to each other and considered each other's ideas in their work which enabled them to enhance speaking and listening skills. They searched the net and read a lot of documents on their topics and afterwards they wrote their first drafts which caused them to make use of reading and writing skills.

The results obtained from this study and the literature reviewed suggest that quite a lot of researchers in the field of education support the idea that blogs have great potentials as instructional tools in language teaching and learning. The findings of this study revealed that the students both enjoyed the class blog activities and improved their skills better than their traditional classroom contexts. The students made use of the four basic skills of learning a language while they were doing class blog activities by reading, writing their own texts on the week's topic, speaking and asking their peers for advice and listening their friends' ideas having conversations about one another's posts and comments. The results showed that the students have positive attitudes using the class blog as they like expressing themselves freely. It can be said that the students benefited the class blog activities as English learning tool in multiple ways and their progress could clearly be seen when they started to use more complicated sentences in their conversations towards the end of the study.

Weblogs are tools to share all types of resources such as videos, texts, photos or images. The freedom of choices which was provided by the blogging activities led the students made their choice in favour of class blog activities rather than reading a given text in their books and writing on their notebooks just to keep the records of their studies for themselves. After analysing the semi-structured interviews and the observations done in the classroom by the researcher, it could certainly be said that implementing a class blog as a learning tool, makes the students active learners who willingly participate in all parts of their learning process by interacting, communicating, exchanging ideas, accomplishing individual, pair and group works, trying to make benefit of several authentic resources and giving feedback to each other.

After evaluating the students' answers to the interview questions and the researcher's field notes taken during the implementation of the study, a list of benefits which are possible to be gained using a class blog as a language learning tool can be summarized as follows:

- Class blogs written jointly by the students can support group and peer learning.
- Students can see the comments and opinions of others which they will benefit as feedback.
- Students can express themselves freely in their posts.
- Students make use of all kinds of resources performing the blog tasks.
- Students can reach a larger audience not just the teacher.
- Students may find using blogs entertaining which enables them to keep their motivation levels alive.
- Students can develop a sense of community in which they help each other and learn from one another.
- While the students are preparing their blog post, they take control of their own learning which enables them to be autonomous learners.
- Class blog may contribute students' being better readers and writers.
- Class blog implementation may be one of the best student-centred applications since it gives students the opportunity to decide about most of the educational acts of themselves by being active participants throughout the whole process.
- Implementation of class blog can be one of the best ways of student interaction which may lead peer learning and feedback, group work, communication and critical thinking.
- Class blog may serve as a portfolio keeping tool because what the students did will always be there in a reverse chronological order.
- Thanks to the blogging activities of all kind, it can be possible to improve all basic language skills.
- Participating in a class blog activity by being able to see everybody's work and comment on each other's post may be motivative for students.
- Being exposed to several authentic materials can be beneficial from the point of lexical competence.
- Knowing that their products will be published can make students more motivated and serious toward their assignment which will lead language awareness in the end.
- Class blog is a social environment, and learning in this context has some certain benefits.
- Thanks to the multifunctional feature of a class blog, students can experience new language forms incidentally.
- Students will have the chance to continue class discussions about the topics they are responsible for outside the classroom, whenever and wherever they are.
- A class blog can create opportunities to produce the target language forms in authentic and meaningful context which is a great motivation for the students.

As a conclusion, it can be said that quite a lot of researchers in the field of education support the idea that blogs have great potentials as instructional tools in language teaching and learning. By taking the results of this study it can be summarised that students find blogging activities motivating to learn a second or foreign language. They think that blogging is more

enjoyable than traditional classroom activities because in their class blog they have more chances to express themselves and to have more authentic communication activities. They benefit from the feedback they get from their peers and teacher which enhances their language learning and critical thinking skills. One more thing the students think as an advantage provided by the class blog is that it enables them study in collaboration by being in constant interaction which gives them a chance to experience different point of views. They express that they feel free preparing their blog posts, which actually means that they take control of their own learning that refers to learner autonomy.

REFERENCES

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Autonomy.* Second edition. London: Pearson Education

Belderrain, Y. (2006). Distance education trends: Integrating new technologies to foster student interaction and collaboration. *Distance Education,* 27(2), 139-153. From: http://www.infomaworld.com/smmpp/content

Campbell, A. P. (2003) Weblogs for Use with ESL classes. *The internet TESL Journal. From:* http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell

Godwin & Jones B. (2003). Blogs and Wikis: Environment for on-line Collaboration, *Language Learning and Technology, 7(2), 12-16.*

Grami, G. M. (2012). Online collaborative writing for ESL learners using blogs and feedback checklists. *English Language Teaching, 5(10),43-48.*

Hsu, H. Y. & Wang, S.K. (2010). The impact of using blogs on college students' reading Comprehension and learning motivation. *Literacy, Research and Instruction,* 50(1), 68-88

Keller, J. M. (2008). An integrative theory of motivation, volition and performance. *Technology, Instruction, Cognition and Learning. 6 (2).*

Lee, L. (2011). Blogging: Promoting learner autonomy and intercultural competence through study abroad. *Language Learning & Technology, 15(3), 87-109.*

Oravec, J. A. (2002). Constructive approaches to Internet recreation in the workplace. *Communications of the ACM, 45, 60-63.*

Soares, D. A. (2008). Understanding class blog as a tool for language development. *Language Teaching Research 12(4) 517-533.*

Ward, J. M. (2004). Blog assisted language learning (BALL): Push button publishing for the pupils. *TEFL Web Journal, 3(1), 1-16.*

Zawilinski, L. (2009). HOT Blogging: A Framework for Blogging to Promote Higher Order
Thinking. *The Reading Teacher.62, 650-661*.