OPINIONS OF ELEMENTARY LEVEL EFL LEARNERS ON THE USE OF WEBLOGS

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ABSTRACT

Technology is an indispensable part of our lives and education cannot be taught without it. Since technology is in every part of our lives, foreign language education also makes use of the new technology. By the use of the Internet, virtual classrooms and materials are easy to access and learning takes place beyond the boundaries of the classrooms. Weblogs or blogs are one of the tools that are used to teach language skills in EFL courses and students have a chance to reflect on what they wrote in the blogs.

The aim of this study is to find the opinions of elementary level EFL learners on using weblogs and distance education. The subjects of the study were 10 Native speakers of English in London and 15 Turkish EFL learners who are learning English in the School of Foreign Languages. Turkish EFL learners created a class blog and every week they were given assignments by their class teacher. They wrote paragraphs and they gave and receive feedback on their writing in terms of content, vocabulary and grammar by their classmates and by native English speakers in a virtual environment. This procedure lasted for 6 weeks. At the end of 6 weeks, students were given an evaluation questionnaire and they were asked to write their opinions about using weblogs. They were also interviewed by their teacher and the opinions of the students were categorized. Findings indicate that the students found the idea of weblogs as a distant learning tool motivating, enjoyable and encouraging.

Keywords: EFL learning; weblog; writing; interaction; learner autonomy, distance education, technology, educational tools.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is one of the fastest growing areas in education (Moore & Tait, 2002) and it is not a new phenomenon. Distance education evolved thanks to the increasing usage of computer and internet in the field of education especially in the last two decades. It has become a more preferred system. It has been more than a century since the concept of distance education defined. Since then the concept of distance education has changed a lot in accordance with the developing technology and increasing education needs. Without any doubts; using web-based online courses via internet has made inevitable contributions (Sakar, N. 2009).

As Yucel (2006) suggests the distance learning models administered via letters, press, television and CDs have ended up with practical and successful results. Since the Internet is global, unlimited and open to public, the teaching applications planned for the Internet environment has a potential of moderating the nature of distance learning.

She adds that e-learning, as a new version of distance learning, is applied via the Internet technologies and involves the educational activities which do not require the presence of the teacher and the learner at the same time and place.

Distance education has the following benefits for the students:
- It gives freedom of time and space
- It gives a chance to individual learning and avoids the conflict between fast and slow learning
- It gives more chance to practice
- It facilitates learning with its rich content and visual possibilities so the interest to the lesson increases
- It increases motivation by providing immediate feedback
- It makes students more organized
- It facilitates students' transition from abstract to concrete concepts smoothly (Yıldırım, 2010).

In the context of distance language teaching, technology does not only provide opportunities for online activities but also becomes an inevitable part of learning. Technology offers students access to instructional resources and creates opportunities to learn and practice the target language beyond the classroom. Technology-enhanced instruction makes possible learning experiences that are open, flexible, and distributed, providing opportunities for engaging interactive and efficient instruction (Smith & Hardaker, 2000). Thus, Computer-Mediated Communication takes on a much more prominent role than the on-site (classroom) setting, apparently because the learners study in isolation from a variety of physical/geographical places. CMC in such a context accommodates 'anywhere and anytime' interaction among learners and is usually observed in the form of asynchronous CMC realized via email, voice mail, forum and discussion boards, blogs and wikis (Ozdener & Satar, 2008). As Galien & Bowcher (2010) claim the use of the internet for researching and gathering information is well-entrenched in many language teaching/learning situations, and the plethora of sites in English makes the number and type of authentic English language resources more accessible than ever before.

These resources are indeed helpful for language teachers and with the increasing use of portable handheld internet capable devices in various language teaching contexts, many teachers can count on 24/7 access to powerful technologies as part of their instructional design (Dede, 2004; cited in Galien & Bowcher, 2010).

Weblogs or Blogs

The term blog is a contraction of two words: web and blog, and they are a fairly new tool for written communication and interaction. Their global reach and collaborative nature are difficult to compare with any other type of pre-internet writing and their scope, variety and reach are a reflection of the times that we live in (Galien & Bowcher, 2010). Blogs enable users to create Web pages without having any knowledge of how to design it; in addition, blogs enable users to write about various subjects on these web pages and enable other users to add comments to the written messages (Abdullah & Kuzu, 2006).

User-friendly qualities such as easy content management, accessibility, navigation, publishing, and archiving make weblogs widely adaptable means for instructional design (Bull, Bull & Kajder, 2003; Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Kajder & Bull, 2003; Reagin, 2004;

cited in Karaman & Serpil, 2005). As Ferdig & Trammell (2004) state blogs are very effective tools in teaching and learning since they provide students with an environment that helps students reflect and publish their own thoughts. For Abdullah & Kuzu (ibid.), students sharing the same environment during the learning processes can become acquainted with each other with the help of blogs and can strengthen their relationships by sharing their feelings and thoughts with each other out of the class environment. According to Galien & Bowcher (2010), blogs have a different purpose than the other social networking services such as facebook and twitter, and they can provide a public forum for an individual's thoughts, ideas, tips, commentaries or anything else that one would like to keep a regular written record of.

They further add that blogs are an accessible online form of authentic written text that can be used as a resource in or outside the language classroom. Blogs can be utilized in every part of language learning: to improve writing, reading, listening skills, to improve vocabulary and grammar. When they are used in writing classes, they can be written as a portfolio of student's work and they are used to monitor the progress of the student. They can also be used in teaching paragraph and essay types and how to write them. Since the class time is limited and students need more time to think and write, it is thought that they can write more and exchange their ideas with their peers.

As Karaman & Serpil (2005) state weblogs enable educators to prescreen and select hyperlinks and list them in a categorized format, and these hyperlinks and user entries can be archived for easy future access from the main weblog. Compared with e-mail lists and discussion forums, weblogs are more focused and easier to navigate since students do not have to search through complex folder menus. Thus, publishing on a weblog to the whole world means reaching beyond the classroom for a student (Karaman & Serpil, 2005).

Galien & Bowcher (2010) claim that using the blog gives the students an additional and motivating opportunity since they publish their work in a non-judgmental fun environment, provides increased and more balanced student communication and it allows the quieter students' time to consider what to write and to formulate their responses. According to Mynard (2007) foreign language students need to draw on previously learned language in order to write a blog entry, which means they are likely to be reflecting on their understanding of the language as they compose their log entries. Campbell (2003) states that weblogs has some benefits:

- They can provide a bridge between lessons, teachers can post materials that recycle and review vocabulary and topics presented during lessons.
- They can save the teacher time as information about schedule changes, homework assignments etc.

For Felix (2007), there are four communication patterns teachers perceive as a result of blogging: 1) increased peer interaction among students, 2) increased teacher interaction with the students, 3) students exhibiting more positive emotions about learning, and 4) an increased sharing of ideas among students and with the teacher.
As Richardson (2004) points out, blogging is a new genre of writing in learning, which has:

> "...... great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy among other things. Blogging, however, offers students a chance to a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a 214

topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a life time, c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking and d) synthesize disparate learning experiences and understand their collective relationship and relevance. This just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I see those things sorely lacking anywhere in traditional education."

Previous Research on Weblogs

As Kuzu (2008) states, research related to blogs shows a distribution on two main fields as; attitude or view surveys or the effect blogs bring to instruction or medium.

Among these are Weller, Pegler and Mason's (2004) study that tried to find out the views of the students on Internet-based technologies; Xie and Sharma's (2004) study that included interviews to investigate the views of nine doctoral students on the use of weblogs in instructional settings; Barbosa and Serrano's (2005) study that investigated views of both learners and teachers on instructional use of blogs; Wang and Fang's (2005) study to determine the benefits of weblogs for collaborative learning; the study of Lin et al. (2006) that implemented a blog system in an international distance course between Japan and Taiwan; Du and Wagner's (2007) study that empirically examined whether the continuous use of weblogs as online learning logs would affect learning performance within the context of university senior level business education; Taslacı's (2010) study that focused on the perceptions of EFL learners on blended writing classes, either face-to-face or blog applications; Arslan and Kızıl's (2010) study that focused on whether the use of blog software by Intermediate level English learners has an effect on their writing performance in class.

In the light of the findings above, the purpose of the current case study is to find the opinions of the students on writing in a class weblog, on interacting with their peers and native English speakers, and the students' perceptions of distance education in foreign language learning. This study tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the opinions of the students to writing in a class weblog?
2. What are the perceptions of the students about distance education in foreign language learning?

METHOD

Subjects

This case study was carried out with 15 Elementary level EFL learners attending the School of Foreign Languages in 2009 Fall Term. The School of Foreign Languages at Anadolu University has an Intensive English Language Program which aims to develop students' general and academic English language skills and the courses are called as Reading, Writing, Grammar in Context and Listening/Speaking.

The students are placed into different levels according to their proficiency levels. Teaching writing in an elementary class and noticing the interest of the students in the Internet, the researcher
decided to carry out a case study on using weblogs.

The choice of the students was on voluntary basis since the students who had access to a computer and the Internet wanted to participate in the study.

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The voluntary students in the writing course were chosen for the study because the course focused on writing at the paragraph level in the Fall Term and it was thought that the students can go beyond the boundary of the class and practice what they learnt in the class in a virtual environment.

Weblog application was carried out as a distant learning activity since the use of blogs was not related to course content. Everything was shared with the students in a virtual environment. In order to create an authentic communication and interaction, 10 Native English university students were chosen by the help of a teacher in London.

Native English students read the tasks of the EFL students every week and they gave comments on their writing.

Data Collection Procedure
The weblog application lasted for 6 weeks and it had the following stages:

- ➢ Introduction of the term weblog and looking at some samples: Before the application, the voluntary students were given a training session out of the class in a language lab by the researcher. This session included the introduction of blogs, some sample blogs, how to enter the blog page and how to add pictures, music, videos or other types of visual or graphic design to their blog entries.
- ➢ Preparation for the weblog activities: After the training session, the researcher chose www.blogspot.com service to design the class weblog as a moderator and the students started to write in the class blog. The students worked as a group which consisted of two Turkish students and one native English student.
- ➢ Application of the assignments: The teacher gave them some assignments to do every week. They tried to write their entries in a two-day period.
- ➢ Writing comments on each other's paragraphs and making the necessary changes in the paragraphs: After finishing writing their weblog entries, every Turkish student in the group gave and receive comments but native English speakers only gave comments about EFL learners' entries.

Every week the students were given tasks to do such as the following:

1. Write about yourself and your family.
2. Write about your hometown or the city you attend university.
3. Describe your best friend
4. Describe your own room
5. Write about one of your days
6. Write about a film you have watched recently

At the end of the 6-week period, the students were asked to complete an informal questionnaire which was originally developed by Galien & Bowcher (2010) and some items were added by the researcher. The questions and responses to the questionnaire are shown in Table: 1.

Follow-up interviews were also carried out to have more detailed ideas of the students.

Table: 1
Responses to the Evaluation Questionnaire

	Question	Answers (total number of sts. 15)	
		Yes	No
1.	Have you ever blogged before using the class blog?	5	10
2.	Did you find the blog easy to use?	11	4
3.	Were the teacher's instructions on the blog easy to follow? If not, what other instructions would you have liked?	10	5
4.	How long did it take you to write your blog response? Less than 20 minutes – 5 students 21 to 40 minutes – 8 students One hour – 1 student More than one hour – 1 student		
5.	Did you feel comfortable using the blog?	13	2
6.	Do you think the blog was a useful part of writing the paragraph on yourself and your life?	14	1
7.	How did you feel about the other students being able to read your blog response? Positive: 12 ; Negative:3		
8.	Did you check the dictionary while you were writing your blog response?	11	4
9.	Did you write a draft of what you wanted to say before you submitted your blog response?	12	3
10	Did you like to communicate with native English speakers through blogs?	14	1
11	Would you like to use a blog for class again?	14	1

Data Analysis

The responses of the students to the informal evaluation questionnaire were calculated (see Table 1.) to have a general idea of their perceptions of using weblogs. Moreover, interviews were carried out after students completed the informal questionnaire and they were tape recorded. Each interview lasted about 10 minutes. The students were wanted to make comments on their answers, make general comments about the use of blogs and distance learning experience. The tape recorded data were transcribed by the researcher and the answers of the students were categorized. Emerging ideas are categorized under the same heading.

RESULTS

The responses of the students to the questionnaire showed that the students were interested in writing in a class weblog. Their responses on the ease of use (Q. 2 and 3) and the usefulness of the blog (Q. 6 and 11) were generally positive. Most of the students engaged in drafting and checking the dictionary and they felt positive about being able to read other posts as well as having other students read their posts. Their responses on the interaction with native English speakers were positive and they wanted to continue writing in a weblog. The emerging categories of the interviews were learner autonomy, development of computer skills, improvement of writing skills, interaction with their peers, and reflective and critical thinking skills.

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Learner Autonomy

Some students stated that the idea of doing some studies outside the class made them feel free.

> *"Weblog is a good idea to practice what I learnt in writing class. I always asked the teacher in the class but when I write in the class weblog, I take my own responsibility. When I have difficulty, I search the Internet or look at my books".*
> *"I do not like studying English outside the class but weblog makes me feel motivated to learn English and I am happy to study myself and express myself".*

Development of Computer Skills

The students were very positive of using technology while learning English.

> *"I always used the Internet for chatting. This is the first time I write in a weblog".*
> *"Learning English and practicing what we do in class is fantastic".*
> *"I can use the Internet for searching information and I do it fast now".*
> *"Writing in the weblog improved my keyboard skills".*

Improvement of Writing Skills

Of 15 students who participated in the study, 13 of them stated that they could not write paragraphs well when they first started prep school. They learnt to write paragraphs about themselves, their families, likes and dislikes, describe people and places. Some of them said:

> *"At the beginning of the term, I hated writing. When we started to write in our class weblog, I enjoyed it because I like spending time in the Internet. I realized that my writing skills also improved".*
> *"I hated writing at the beginning but I like writing now because of weblog activity because I write about myself and use the keyboard".*

Interaction with Peers

The students enjoyed sharing a class weblog with their classmates and native English speakers. Some students stated that:

> *"I am always with my classmates at school. When I write in the weblog, I learn more about them and I feel that I belong to a group. When I receive feedback from them, I feel happy and I correct my mistakes".*
> *"I do not have a foreign friend but now there is someone abroad who reads my entries and gives feedback to me. I think this is very important".*
> *"I communicate with my friends via internet. This is great!".*

Reflective and Critical Thinking Skills

When students gave feedback to their friends' paragraphs, they also had a chance to check what they wrote and they tried to have a critical eye on the weblog activity. Some of them said:

> *"Writing in class weblog improved my writing in a paragraph level. It also changed my ideas about writing skill".*
> *"The teacher always corrected my work in the class but in the weblog I am alone. I exchange ideas with my friends and I feel free to write".*

By checking my work and other friends' work, I can criticize myself and them but I cannot do this in class".

In terms of students' views on distance education, the emerging categories included ideas such as using the Internet without time and space limitations, no assessment requirements on the part of the teacher, taking the responsibility of their own learning, increasing their confidence and social skills in learning, being more reflective and critical, and having a sense of belonging to a group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This case study showed that students liked the idea of writing in a weblog. They stated that writing in a class weblog was very motivating for them. Even though they did not like writing in the class, they liked writing in the weblog since the tasks focused on students' lives. The blog also provided students to view their progress and monitor their improvement.

Thus, they can reflect on what they wrote before. Parallel to Mynard's (2007) findings, the students in this study commented on what they learnt previously when they composed their log entries. They also seemed to increase their critical thinking skills by reflecting on what they or their friends wrote in the blog. This case study also showed that the students improved peer interaction, interaction with the teacher and native English speakers. The students had positive opinions about learning English in general and writing in particular. They tried to practice English outside the class in a non-threatening friendly environment and they tried to apply what they learnt in class to real life.

Thus, they become autonomous learners by building bridges between classroom learning and learning outside the class. They were observed as being reluctant when they were given assignments to complete in the class but in this study they were eager to do the tasks because they were combining the technology with language learning in an enjoyable way.

This study showed that blogs can be used as a distant learning tool to interact with other students, the teacher or native people in a natural learning environment. If organized carefully, distance foreign language education offers students a chance to learn without time and space constraints in an interactive learning environment. Thus, it becomes a more powerful tool to learn and practice the target language outside the class by training more reflective and critical students.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was limited to 15 elementary level EFL learners in a writing course. Future studies might be carried out with students from different proficiency levels and in different courses. This study was carried out as a distant learning activity since the number of students was decided on a voluntary basis and the activities in the class and the blog were different. Future studies might be conducted with all the students in class, and blog use may be compared with face-to-face learning.

Moreover, the students' writing proficiency may be compared by applying pre-test and post-test designs to compare writing in blogs and writing in class.

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