

LANGUAGE STUDY THROUGH BLOG EXCHANGES

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the effectiveness of using blog exchanges for intercultural learning and improving linguistic competence. An overview of the use of blogs for language learning is followed by data analysis from the author's two exchange projects between university English classes in Japan and both English and Japanese classes in the United States. This paper ends by offering insights about how to conduct international blog exchanges.

1. Introduction

Blogging has become a part of many people's daily lives – including those of our students. Since blogging really began to grow at the turn of the millennium, the numbers of blogs and the range of topics they touch on seems to have become infinite, and their popularity and accessibility for users of the Internet make them an exciting application for language teachers as they are largely writing-based, and have great capability to support images, audio, and video. An important part of blogging is linking to other blogs and commenting on blogs. Both of these qualities make blogging not only a personal endeavor but also a social endeavor, thus placing blogs within the group of social networking applications of the Web 2.0 generation.

This paper will offer a brief overview of how blogs have been used in language learning, and then will give a summary of findings from the author's two blog exchange projects conducted between students in Japan and the United States. Finally, as a conclusion, a number of insights will be offered for conducting blog exchanges with classes in other countries.

2. Blogs in Language Classes

Blogs, short for weblogs, are essentially easily created webpages which are pre-formatted for posting time-stamped writing, pictures, audio files and or video files. Blogs comprise a series of applications which Godwin-Jones (2003) refers to as the second generation of web applications. While blog-use among the general public has only become widespread in the last six years (Thorne and Payne, 2005, p. 382), during that time the growth in usage has been exponential along with other Internet-based social networking tools. Still, the relatively short period of six years permits a reasonably comprehensive overview of how blogs have been used in language learning – or at least what has been published on this topic.

Research focusing on blog use in language classes is still relatively scarce in the literature. Studies that have been published include research on blogging's effect on learner autonomy (Pinkman, 2005), increasing writing fluency (Fellner and Apple, 2005), as a place for completing writing assignments (Ward, 2004; Wu, 2005), posting class materials (Johnson, 2004), and as a way to open communication with bloggers outside the classroom (Pinkman and Bordolin, 2006). From a simple search of the Internet, however, it is clear that much language classroom blogging is occurring and simply not being reported in language learning literature.

Taking account of the literature that has been reported, it is apparent that blogs have generally been used for in-class assignments for which the classroom teacher or other students become the primary audience. This seems to contrast greatly with the major premise of blogging's popularity as a social networking tool. Pinkman and Bortolin (2006) had students make some contact with other bloggers on the Internet, and Campbell (2004, 2), noting the difficulty in getting 'participation from readers outside the classroom', writes about a project using Live Journal which, due to its social networking-focused features, helps blogging students make contact with others around the world. Dekita.org, a website set up by Campbell, Barbara Dieu and Rudolph Ammann, also merits mention. Dekita.org has links to many blogs around the world, and it is a worthwhile visit for teachers looking to expose their blogging students to readers and other bloggers outside their own classrooms. Still, published literature shows surprisingly little pointing to blogs' use for language learning through contact with other bloggers outside the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to report on such an effort – a blog exchange – held between students in Japan and the United States.

3. Blog Exchanges

In this paper, a blog exchange refers to an arrangement by which two classes of students both maintain blogs, either individually or as a group, and then comment on each others' blogs over the course of a certain amount of time. Just as email, chat programs and other computer mediated communication tools have been used for telecollaboration (Belz, 2003), blogs can also be used as a tool for language and cultural exchange and collaboration.

4. Studies

The two studies conducted by the author took place from September 2006 until December 2006. One study linked one of the author's second year university EFL classes with a native English speaking 6th grade reading class in New York State in the United States. This study will hereafter be referred to as the 'New York Exchange'. The other study linked one of the author's other second year university EFL classes with a university intermediate-level Japanese class in California in the United States. This study will be hereafter referred to as the 'California Exchange'. In the Japanese class, all participants were expert or native English speakers.

In the 'New York Exchange' there were 23 participants on the author's side and 24 on the New York side (23 three at the end because one participant moved). In the 'California Exchange' there were 20 participants on the author's side, and 5 at the beginning, 4 at the end, on the California side. In both projects, the author's students and the US participants would both post and respond to partners' blog posts once over the course of one week. In the 'New York Exchange' topics were the same for both sides, chosen by the teachers, and all related to the theme of 'environment'. In the 'California Exchange' the topics differed for both sides. On the California side they were chosen by the instructor, while on the Japan side they were chosen by the students. For both the New York and the California projects, Japanese students were assigned partners on the US side. In the New York Exchange, partners exchanged one-to-one, while in the California Exchange the US university students each had four Japanese partners at the beginning, and five at the end. In both projects, students on the Japan side made comments for their partners and began their blog entries during class time. This facilitated working out technical problems or other questions, and it allowed the instructor

to take notes on students' participation, conversation, and general approach to the project. In terms of data, the instructor collected process data (Chapelle, 2003), post project questionnaires, and blog posts and comments from both sides of the exchange.

Both studies had the objectives of comparing students' language learning through the exchange. In this paper, the author divides language learning into linguistic competence and intercultural competence. Following is a brief explanation of what represents learning in both of these areas.

5. Intercultural and Linguistic Competence

The development of linguistic competence, for the purposes of this study, is defined as the acquisition of grammatical, lexical, and orthographic conventions. The development of intercultural competence is based on the assessment of intercultural communicative competence model offered by Byram (1997). Due to space constraints, a full explanation of Byram's model will not be given here. However, it is worth mentioning that among other strengths, Bryam's model of intercultural communicative competence offers clear objectives for assessing intercultural communicative competence and thus was chosen as an assessment model in this study. In this paper, only one of Byram's (1997) many objectives for intercultural communicative competence will be looked at, but the reader is encouraged to delve more into Bryam's model if he or she is interested in gaining a complete view of the model offered.

Evidence of Language Learning

The following are two examples of data from the aforementioned exchanges. This is meant as a brief but representative view of the overall data from the exchange and leads to insights in

the conclusion of this paper. In this section, the development of linguistic competence will first be discussed, followed by a discussion about the development of intercultural competence.

Linguistic Competence

In terms of linguistic competence, both exchanges revealed potential, though not conclusive evidence of improvements in students' abilities. While learners were clearly exposed to new lexical items, native English grammatical structures, and a certain level of pragmatics, it was not clear whether or not these forms were actually acquired by the learners. It is worthwhile to note, however, that the two projects presented very different types of native English exposure to participants.

Not surprisingly, the English produced by the sixth graders in the New York Project contrasted greatly with that of the university level Japanese language learners in the California Project. The blog posts and comments by sixth graders were often replete with orthographic and sometimes grammatical errors, evidenced in the following exchange example between Mary and Yoko. Mary writes:

'My mom is a buisness anaylist. She works at Anthem/Welpoint Blue Cross Blue Shield. It is located in Indiana. She works at home. I spend her money to buy snacks. Sometimes I buy crafts to make. She buy's me lessons for gymnastics. My mom lets me buy a lot of things.'

Yoko comments:

'What is business anaylist? Sorry, I can't understand it.
So, you should appreciate your mother.'

Within the above exchange, there are many things to note in regards to the potential improvement of linguistic competence for Yoko. First, again, the orthographic errors of 'buisiness', 'anaylist' and 'Welpoint' could actually result in negative acquisition on Yoko's part. Looking at her response, we see that she correctly writes 'business', but incorrectly writes 'anaylist', copying the same spelling used by Mary. It is difficult to conclude that any acquisition actually took place in this short exchange, but if acquisition was occurring, it certainly cannot be judged to be entirely positive despite the fact that Mary is a native English speaker. A further note to this exchange is the presence of a new lexical item for Yoko, 'business analyst'. Asking about such an item seems the goal of such a language exchange as it points to a clear case in which Yoko is going to acquire, or at least become aware of, a new lexical item through an authentic context. However, in subsequent interactions with Yoko, Mary never actually explained about a 'business analyst'. Whether this was for lack of knowledge, lack of temporal continuity in the exchange, or lack of motivation remains unknown. In any case, this short exchange exemplifies much of what occurred in the New York Exchange. Japanese students were definitely exposed to new lexical items, forms of address, and complex grammar structures. However, they were also exposed to errors on the part of the sixth grade native English speakers, and furthermore their exchanges often lacked continuity even when good questions were asked, as with this question by Yoko.

Intercultural Competence

Bryam's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence offers a number of objectives for assessment. Here, I will only look at one of these objectives and observe its presence or lack thereof within one interaction in the California Exchange. With regard to

attitudes, Byram (1997) writes about three assessment objectives, the third of which will be examined here. It is written as follows:

‘willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one’s own environment.’ (Byram, 1997, p. 92)

Note the following exchange between Shunsuke on the Japanese side and Madeline on the American side. Shunsuke writes:

‘Japanese baseball player in America

Do you like baseball? A few days ago, Japan-U.S. baseball game was held in Japan.

Did you watch this game on TV? I watched it every day. The United States is strong,

isn’t it? Japan was not able to win. Japan won last year, so The United States might

have put out seriousness this year. (...) The Japanese player’s activity in the United

States is being broadcast in Japan. The player in the United States also has been

playing in Japan, though a Japanese player is playing in the United States recently. Is

the player in the United States active in Japan televised in the United States?

I do not like playing baseball, but I like watching baseball game. I often go to stadium

to watch the baseball game. What sports do you like?’

Madeline comments:

‘Hi Shunsuke, I don’t usually watch baseball, but my husband likes to hear about the Japanese players here. I like Ichiro the best because I think he’s good looking! My husband says Matsui’s nickname is Godzilla, which is awful.

What do you think about the American players who play baseball in Japan? I don't know any because they are not famous here.'

In the above exchange, it is difficult to say definitively that Shunsuke displays 'willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment' as per Bryam's (1997) objective regarding attitudes. Nonetheless, Shunsuke's question, 'Is the player in the United States active in Japan televised in the United States?' shows some regard for the fact that, just because Matsui and Ichiro and other baseball players might be covered on television in Japan, this does not mean that U.S. baseball players playing in Japan would be covered by the US news. Thus, this could be interpreted as Shunsuke's 'question[ing] the values and presuppositions in cultural practices' to some extent, though it by no means is a clear indication of such. In fact, there are more plausible explanations. Given the fact that Shunsuke is familiar with baseball, he must be aware that while Japanese baseball stars are going to the United States to play, the Americans playing in Japan are not stars in their home country, and therefore would probably not necessarily receive significant media attention. A further point is that even if this exchange showed signs of fulfilling Byram's (1997) objective, it would only signal the presence of intercultural competence, not necessarily development. This brief example resembles much of what occurred during the exchange. As was suggested above, the blog exchange lacked continuity in that it was not really a conversation that continued between the partners. For this reason, while students undoubtedly were being exposed to new ideas and considering the foreign context of their partners, clear evidence of the development of intercultural competence did not appear in the exchange data.

6. Conclusion

For the purposes of language exchange, blogs may present unique limitations different from other CMC tools. As alluded to above, a serious drawback of using blogs for language exchange is the lack of continuity due to the post-comment structure of most blogs. Rather than encouraging ongoing discussion, the post-comment structure leads to interesting yet very short exchanges. The blog exchanges described in this paper seemed to yield a new exchange each week rather than a deeper exchange of language and culture among the participants. It is not clear how to respond to comments made on blogs and that leads to an incomplete mode of continuous communicative exchange on a single topic.

Despite blogs' weaknesses as the sole medium of a language exchange, blogs still have great potential within interclass language exchanges. Blogs are easily accessible and used by students familiar with the Internet, and they can host a variety of communicative media (i.e., audio, images, video). As a way to begin building a partnership, blogs provide a solid foundation through which learners can build their identity and reflect on the language they are producing for their partner audience, thus paving the way for perhaps more intensive synchronous or interactive forms of communication later on. Since the drawback of blogs for exchange is the lack of an interactive discussion-oriented feature, a blog exchange should be supplemented by a discussion forum, email, or when available and feasible, synchronous communication through text, voice, or video chat.

There is no doubt that Web 2.0 technologies are opening up new doors for global communicative exchange and language development. Nonetheless, tools are tools, and how a tool is used affects the end product. Blogs, one of the first-born and most popular of the

Web 2.0 technologies, definitely can be a tool for building intercultural relationships and helping students learn language through exchange, but instructors should consider how blogs fit together best with other forms of communication to build the most fruitful partnership possible.

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