

# » Using Blogs in the Foreign Language Classroom: Encouraging Learner Independence

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*This small scale action research study explores how the author incorporated a blog project into an integrated-skills foreign language class in a Japanese university. This project was an out-of-class project aimed at motivating students to take advantage of authentic environments outside the classroom in order to practice language skills and communicate with others. This study seeks to determine the usefulness of using blogs in the foreign language classroom, and to assist foreign language professionals interested in developing learner independence in their own learners by using this relatively new computer-based learning forum. Data were collected from learners through questionnaires and interviews conducted at the end of the term. At this time, learners were asked to reflect on their attitudes about the blog project and how it aided them in practicing English out of the classroom. Findings suggest that learner-perceived benefits of using blogs included increased interest and motivation to use English because of interaction with, and feedback from, classmates and teachers. There is also indication, however, that although the project helped to improve reading and writing skills, some learners were more interested in developing oral communication skills not directly addressed in the blog project. The findings also suggest that learners who participated in the blog project were interested in continuing to blog even after the semester finished. Further research needs to focus on whether or not learners did indeed continue using this resource after the course ended, and in which foreign language courses this project is most suitable.*

**L**earner empowerment, learner autonomy, learner independence: from Paulo Freire to Henri Holec to Rebecca Oxford, ideas concerning teaching learners how to learn have had an important impact on foreign language teaching. Many foreign language instructors are now concerned not only with instruction in the classroom, but also with preparing learners to take responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom. Once learners take responsibility for their learning, they will be more able to capitalize on learning environments both in and out of the classroom, hopefully making them life-long and efficient learners.

It is not uncommon for foreign language instructors to feel a responsibility towards their learners to create and maintain environments that motivate learners to continue learning even after class ends. Multimedia resources provide instructors with an authentic and interesting tool to help achieve learner independence. Computer-based learning environments can be manipulated to provide students with an opportunity to learn, practice, and communicate outside the classroom. One of these relatively new environments is the blog. Short for weblog, a blog is an easy to maintain online journal that can provide foreign language learners a venue in which they can reflect, comment, question, review, and communicate—outside the classroom in an authentic environment.

This small scale action research study discusses how the author incorporated a blog project into a foreign language class in a Japanese university. This project was an out-of-class project aimed at motivating students to take advantage of authentic environments outside the classroom in order to practice language skills and communicate with others. This study seeks to determine the usefulness of using blogs in the foreign language classroom, and to assist EFL professionals interested in developing learner independence in their own learners by using this relatively new computer-based learning forum.

## Background Information and Relevant Literature

### *Learner Independence*

In the twentieth century, the fields of philosophy, psychology, politics and education have been influenced powerfully by the concepts of autonomy and independence (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 4). Politically charged Freirian ideals concerning the empowerment of learners have been adapted and applied far beyond the political context from which they originated. Although many foreign language instructors may not view their learners as “oppressed” individuals subject to the “tools of submersion” (Freire, 1970), these instructors have nonetheless become more concerned with methods of learning, rather than methods of teaching. This shift is consistent with Freire’s desire to evoke creativity, inquiry, and critical thinking through dialogue and interaction, rather than teacher-centred instruction. The popularity of learner-centredness, communicative language teaching, and strategy instruction are examples of how learner autonomy is manifesting itself in the pedagogy of foreign language instructors.

In a discussion of learner independence, a common distinction is made between the terms *learner autonomy* and *learner independence*. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, although the connotations of each may result in confusion. *Autonomy* can denote control, and *independence* self-reliance. Learner autonomy, as defined by Holec (1981), involves taking charge of one’s learning and being responsible for all the decisions related to all aspects of the learning process including setting objectives, choosing methodology, and evaluating what has been learned. However, independent learning, according to Sheerin (1997, p. 56), also incorporates strategy development as part of the definition. Sheerin adds that learning how to learn, or strategy development, is a fundamental principle of independent learning, appealing to language instructors because of its philosophical and psychological nature. Since this paper is concerned with assisting learners with developing their language skills outside the classroom (learning how to learn), the term *independent learning* will be used since its definition incorporates both the ideas of autonomy as well as strategy instruction.

### *CALL and Learner Independence*

In striving to provide learners with opportunities to continue learning outside the classroom, many foreign language instructors are taking advantage of technology, in that the technology allows learners to work at their own pace, to have the freedom to choose their own materials and their own pedagogical path (Blin, 1999, p. 136). CALL is a useful resource for instructors and students with access to these environments. Technology provides an authentic and global venue in which learners can practice their language skills. In her discussion of strategy training in the CALL classroom, Ngeow (1999, p. 303) states that computers play several roles in helping language teachers address learning styles and strategy development. Ngeow argues that CALL applications can support authentic language learning activities and help students to present ideas in new ways.

Educators are recognizing that in addition to providing authentic and flexible learning environments, computer-based resources can be an ideal location for reflective and collaborative learning. Blogs are one example of this type of resource. Like other on-line environments that encourage reflective thinking, interactivity, and deep learning where students interpret information and apply their knowledge (Cashion and Palmieri, 2002, p.157), blogs are being used to enhance and supplement classroom environments.

### **Blogs**

Blogs are easy-to-create and easy-to-maintain websites. Blogs have been around for over 10 years, but have become more popular since hosting websites such as *Blogger.com* introduced itself in 1999. Blogs function mostly as online journals and their content is traditionally personal. Blogs can be updated at any time using software that allows users with little or no technical background to create, design and maintain the blog.

To date, the most widespread application of computers in language learning has involved student interaction with information systems (Little, 1999). Blogs, however, are innovative in that they require learners to interact with one another, not just the computer. For blog users, or bloggers, the computer is simply the medium for communication. By encouraging interaction with people, blogging takes on a more communicative role than less interactive CALL applications. Blogging, and CALL in general, should not replace face-to-face interaction, but it may provide a practice environment where students can think, reflect, and create language slowly for a real-life audience. Its value as a pedagogical tool appears to be in its authentic, interesting and communicative nature. Furthermore, its popularity outside the foreign language classroom may be a motivating force for technologically savvy young learners, like those attending Japanese universities. For this reason, foreign language instructors interested in motivating their learners to communicate and learn beyond the classroom may benefit from incorporating blog projects into their classrooms.

Since blogs have only recently been gaining popularity as an educational tool, little research using blogs in the foreign language classroom has been done. Ward (2004), however, has described a blog project he implemented in his reading/writing class at the American University of Sharjah, and found many positive results. Ward concluded that a majority of his learners believed that the project assisted their language learning. He also commented that using blogs was a way to help increase student interest in their reading and writing.

## Methodology

### *Rationale for Project*

The author was interested in implementing a study incorporating a blog project into a pre-advanced integrated skills class in order to fulfil the following objectives:

- To determine the usefulness of using blogs to encourage learner independence and out of class learning
- To provide insight for other EFL professionals into the pedagogical applications of using blogs in the foreign language classroom
- To provide students with a forum to express themselves, reflect on what had been covered in class, question one another, recycle language, engage in critical thinking and express opinions.

This project was initiated as a small scale action research study. Action research, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as "...a systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions" (Hopkins, 1985). It should also be noted that the research methodology of this study is more qualitative than quantitative, involving open-ended interviews with learners to gauge their perceptions of the educational practice.

### *Procedure*

This project was implemented in a Pre-Advanced English class at Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) in Japan. The class was an integrated skills class with a focus on oral/aural skills. The class was made up of 15 learners, all of whom were required to obtain a TOEFL score of 475 before entering the class. The learners were from the departments of Humanities, Sociology, Economics, Business, and Law, and were studying in their second, third, and fourth years (of four-year programs) at KGU.

Students were administered a questionnaire concerning their attitudes towards technology and blogs prior to implementing the project (see Appendix A). The responses from this questionnaire were used to organize the project in terms of how much blogging the learners should do per week, what topics should be included, how much background knowledge learners had of blogs, and what they expected to achieve by using blogs in a language class. The project was defined for the learners in a hand-out administered in the second week of a 16-week program (see Appendix B).

In a computer lab, learners were shown a sample blog created by the instructor. Learners were then instructed on how to design their own blog on *Blogger.com*, a popular and easy-to-use free blog provider. Once the learners had completed their blog they were instructed to write their first blog entry, a self-introduction. A list of blog addresses was collected by the instructor and posted on the instructor's main blog. Learners were then instructed to read two to three of their classmates' blogs and comment on them. After the initial lab session, the project was conducted as an out-of-class project. Learners were responsible for writing one entry of 150 words per week, and commenting on two or three of their

classmates' blogs. The contents of their entries were to be based on classroom context. For example, if learners studied how to express their opinions about music that week in class, they were encouraged to recycle or reuse those skills on their blog.

After the semester was completed and final grades were submitted, learners were asked to volunteer to meet one-on-one with the instructor to discuss the project. A questionnaire (see Appendix C) was completed, and open-ended interview questions were asked of the students to gauge their attitudes on the project. These responses were compiled by the instructor in order to determine how students viewed the assignment, how effective the assignment was in encouraging out of class learning, whether or not the students would continue blogging in the future, and how, according to the students, could the assignment be improved.

## Results

### *Pre-project Questionnaire*

The responses to this questionnaire revealed that no student had a blog prior to the class, and only two learners had any knowledge of blogs. One of these learners responded that he knew blogs were "...in fashion on the Internet." The other learner with prior knowledge of blogs responded that blogs were "...a new kind of homepage."

When asked what kind of topics they wanted to discuss on the blogs, the responses included hobbies, music, daily life, movies, travel, "easy" topics, food, and family (see Table 1).

**Table 1: What kind of information do you want to discuss on your blog?**

Response	Number of Learners
Travel	6
Hobbies	4
Personal experiences	4
Music	3
Movies	3
Family	1
The future	1
Something I'm interested in	1
Easy topics	1
Something new to me	1
Food	1
Something nobody knows	1

When asked what they thought the purpose was in using a blog project in an English class, the learners responded that they wanted to communicate, make friends, develop writing skills, and learn about classmates (see Table 2).

**Table 2: What do you think the purpose of the blog project should be?**

Response	Number of Learners
To make friends	3
To learn about classmates	3
To develop writing skills	2
To communicate	2

**Post-project Questionnaire**

When asked to comment on how much time they spent blogging weekly, half of the learners responded that they spent 30 minutes/week working on the project. Three learners spent between 10-15 minutes, and two spent more than one hour blogging each week.

**Learner-perceived advantages of the blog project**

All of the learners interviewed responded that they enjoyed the blog project overall. When asked about the advantages of the project, reasons why they enjoyed using blogs in the classroom, and what they learned from the project, learners reported a variety of responses. Eight learners agreed that they enjoyed interacting with classmates and learning from them. Seven learners cited that they thought their writing skills had improved from participating in the project. Five learners responded that the project assisted them in learning and using new vocabulary. Table 3 lists all responses regarding the advantages of the project.

**Table 3: Learner-perceived advantages**

Response	Number of Learners
Interacting with other learners	8
Improved writing skills	7
Learning and using new vocabulary	5
Practice in technology	2
Thinking in English	2
Grammar practice	1
Typing practice	1

**Learner-perceived disadvantages**

When interviewed about what they thought the disadvantages of the blog project were, four learners commented on that they found the project time-consuming or wished they could have had class time to complete the assignment. Seven learners responded that they were unable to understand the software that uploaded pictures onto their sites. Table 4 lists these and other responses concerning troubles with or disadvantages of the project.

**Table 4: Learner-perceived disadvantages**

Response	Number of Learners
Picture software was too difficult to understand/use	7
The assignment was too time-consuming and/or should have been done in-class	4
The website was only in English and it was difficult to understand	2
Free-writing is too difficult and/or teacher should assign topics	2
Teacher should give fewer topics and allow more free writing	1
Teacher should assign more assignments to be done on the blog	1
There should be a listening option where students can talk and share music	1

**Comments**

When asked how they felt about their teacher commenting on their blog, six learners responded that the comments made them “happy.” Two responded that they “enjoyed” the comments, and two learners indicated that the comments increased their motivation to blog. When asked about how they felt about other learners commenting on their blog, all learners responded positively, saying that they “enjoyed” or “liked” reading comments from their classmates. Some learners explained their answers further and these responses are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5: Learner reactions to comments on their blog from other learners**

Response	Number of Learners
Enjoyed knowing that someone else was reading my blog and thinking about me	2
Enjoyed reading others' opinions	2
Enjoyed a chance to communicate with classmates outside of class	2
Comments from my classmates increased my motivation to blog	2

**Intention to continue blogging**

Of the ten learners interviewed, five agreed that they would continue blogging. One responded that he would not continue blogging. Two learners responded that they would continue blogging if they had time and if other bloggers continued to comment on their site.

## Discussion

Due to the small scale of this action research study (only ten learners consented to participating in the interviews) the results are hoped to inspire foreign language instructors, rather than empirically define the usefulness of incorporating blogs into a foreign language curriculum. The setting for this project was a relatively small Japanese foreign language class, and the findings are difficult to generalize in relation to other settings. Nonetheless, the findings do reveal some salient points for foreign language instructors interested in considering the use of blog projects to encourage out-of-class learning.

## *Learner Independence*

The results of this study show that 8 out of the 10 learners intended to continue blogging after the semester was over. Although this intention appears to be a positive step toward learner independence, more long-term study needs to be done to see if learners are indeed still blogging. Preliminary inquiry shows that two months after the semester has ended, only two of the learners are still blogging. With lack of comments coming from classmates who are not blogging, the motivation of these learners may decrease and their blogging may stop altogether.

Also, it should be noted that only two learners, the two learners who are still blogging two months after the semester has ended, spent an hour or more per week blogging out of class. Most of the learners spent 30 minutes or less per week blogging, and there were some comments made indicating that the out-of-class nature of this assignment was difficult for the learners from a time perspective. Some of the comments indicating that learners had trouble with the time constraints of the project are illustrated below.

"...I can't take enough time to write blog."

"...Not outside...to include class time, if I have time limit I think everyone can try to write faster. If I do it in my house, umm, I wait a long time because I don't have a time limit."

"...Always I have no time so I checked a few students."

Blogs were incorporated into this class in order to encourage out-of-class interaction with authentic language mediums. Many learners, like the ones cited above, however, mentioned time constraints as a disadvantage to the project. If learners feel pressure from participating in 30 minutes of out-of-classroom language study, it appears that this particular blog project for this particular group of students may not have been the best choice of projects to encourage out-of-class study. Another explanation, however, may be connected to the academic expectations of university students in Japan. More work needs to be done on assessing the attitudes of university students in Japan toward learner independence and out-of-class learning, to determine the best methods to use in order to encourage learner independence.

## *Student Comments*

As expected, learners enjoyed the comments other learners and the teacher left on their blogs. Since almost all of the learners had expressed, on the pre-project questionnaire, a



desire to improve their communication skills and meet friends, commenting was included to encourage interaction and exchange, thus making the project more communicative. More unexpectedly, however, over half of the learners cited motivation as something they liked about teacher and learner comments. For example, one student commented,

...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.

Another student responded, in an interview, "Umm, if teacher, or, umm, other student comment me, my motivation become increase..." A third student also commented indirectly on motivation when he said that he would continue blogging after the semester "...if someone comments, I will...I want to be given comments."

Clearly, commenting is an important aspect of blogging. It makes the project communicative, interactive, and interesting. Furthermore, commenting encourages learners to check their blog and share ideas. For blog projects, instructors should consider a system of mandatory commenting or even partnering learners to ensure that someone is always commenting on their blog. In this project, some learners received more comments than others and one interesting comment related to this idea was raised by a learner when he responded, "...I felt that I was communicating with the person who often commented on my blog, which are Keiko and Kathy.\*" This learner did not feel he was communicating with any of the other 13 learners participating in this project. It is important, therefore, to consider ways to ensure commenting is maintained so that learner motivation and communication is taking place.

### *Areas for Improvement*

In assessing learner attitudes toward the blog project, the author uncovered many comments that linked blogging with writing.

"...It is very difficult to write by English but we can progress by English writing ability by write blog."

"...Writing skills. Every week I have to write 150 words, so but only I joined the class I don't have...I couldn't have a chance to write English...150 words so..."

"...When I wrote the blog, I think that oh, I have to study more words, because I can write sentence...writing sentence is not so difficult, but I don't know this ...how to write English, I realized that I have to study more words."

Obviously, blogging is a writing activity and therefore it is not surprising that learners perceived that the project helped their writing. What is interesting to point out, however, is that every learner responded that the reason they took the course was to improve their speaking and communication skills. The course which the blog project was piloted in was an integrated

skills class, and writing is a part of this integration. Learners, however, wanted to practice speaking, communication, and discussion more than any other skill. Outside of class, however, opportunities to speak English are difficult to find and blogging was intended as a supplementary activity to keep skills up, and to aid in fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and communication. It is difficult to say, however, if learners appreciated the objectives of this project, and perhaps the objectives need to be made clearer in the future.

One problem with this study deals with the small number of learners who participated in the project. Although the majority of learners agreed that they were engaging in a communicative activity through the blog project, this communication was limited to members of one pre-advanced class of only 15 learners.

### *Using Blogs for Language Learning*

One major benefit of the blog is that it has the potential for a global audience. The learners in this project had a limited audience, and were not able to interact with native speakers of English. Perhaps a larger participant group, including participants that the learners did not interact with in class, would have led to greater motivation and a more authentic interaction with the medium. Inter-class or inter-school blog projects may work better in creating a global communication and in motivating learners to use authentic resources outside of the class. The learners in this project interacted only with learners from the same class, and therefore may have been unable to see blogging as an out-of-class resource; it was just another classroom assignment. Encouraging students to go beyond the classroom, and interact with new people, may have been a better way to encourage learner independence.

That being said, a couple of learners did have visitors to their blogs that left comments. One comment was negative, and perhaps related to the learner's non-native English ability:  
At 10:56 PM, anonimus said...

What a damn...u're the first japanese I'm seeing a blog of...I just didn't get what you mean with your blog, will you use it as a diary? (duh, that's what blogs are for...), check mine's:

The learner commented that he was surprised by the comment, but not necessarily insulted. Opening up blogs to the global community, however, increases the likelihood that non-class bloggers will communicate with the classmates, and this communication, although authentic and possibly motivating, may also be detrimental to learner self-confidence. More research needs to be done to determine if inter-class, inter-school, and more global blog settings would encourage more motivation in learners to use these mediums.

### **Conclusion**

Indeed, blogs are authentic, interesting, and communicative resources that can serve a variety of purposes in the foreign language classroom. A medium to reflect on material, inquire into issues, and interact with others, blogs provide a rich and easy-to-use environment for both learners and instructors. The recent popularity of blogs, as well as their user-friendly

nature, makes them an obvious choice for instructors wanting to introduce out-of class resources to their learners. This research supports the hypothesis that blogs can also be popular in the language classroom. However, to determine whether or not blogs do indeed encourage greater learner independence and interest in learning beyond the classroom, more research needs to be done. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this paper will provide instructors with insight into the advantages, and some of the disadvantages, connected to using blogs in the classroom. Furthermore, this paper hopes to inspire foreign language instructors to incorporate blogs into their own pedagogy for the purpose of inspiring learner independence or for other objectives. More research needs to be done to determine how to most effectively manipulate blogs in, and out, of the classroom in order to make better use of this interesting and authentic computer-based resource.

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## Appendix A

### *Pre-project questionnaire*

1. Do you know what a "blog" is? What do you know about blogs?
- 2.\* What kind of information do you want to talk about on your blog?
- 3.\* What do you think the purpose of using blogs in an English class is?

\* Questions 2 and 3 were completed after the students were instructed on what a blog was.

## Appendix B

### *Blog Assignment*

For this class you are required to keep a BLOG. A BLOG is an interactive online journal where you can write your thoughts, talk about issues, ask questions to your classmates and teacher, and use the computer to help you practice your English skills. Blogs are a great way to keep up your English outside the class.

Every week you must write at least 150 words on your BLOG. Sometimes you will be able to "free-write." This means you can write about anything you like. Sometimes, your teacher will give you specific instructions about what topics to write about in your BLOG. These topics will be related to issues that we study about in class. **You should make an effort to recycle vocabulary, expressions, and ideas that we discuss in class.** This way you will be using the English that you study in class, and by using it you will have better chance or remembering it in the future.

On each BLOG, there is an opportunity to "comment." This means that if someone reads your BLOG, they can respond to it. **Every week, you should read two or three of your classmates' BLOGS and you should respond to at least one.** You may want to ask them a question or tell them something positive about their BLOG. Please be positive in your comments and help your classmates by giving them good comments or by asking interesting questions.

This assignment is an out-of-class assignment. You are expected to work on your BLOG outside class. You can access your BLOG from any computer that has an Internet connection. If you have difficulties doing this, please discuss your situation with your teacher.

This BLOG assignment is worth 20% of your final mark. Your teacher will be reviewing your BLOGS weekly and giving you feedback by commenting on your BLOG. **Your teacher will give you one mark (10%) on November 22 and another mark (10%) on January 7. You are graded on the following criteria:**

- Do you write at least 150 words/week and comment on someone else's BLOG ? (6 marks)
- Do you use the English (vocabulary, expressions, ideas, issues, etc.) covered in class? (2 marks)
- Do you make an effort to include and explain vocabulary, expressions, and ideas from outside the class (movies, music, literature, etc.) (2 marks)

## Appendix C

### *Interview Questionnaire*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Gender: \_\_\_\_\_  
Contact information: \_\_\_\_\_  
Faculty/Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
Year: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why did you take this class? What are your goals in English? What did you want to improve?
2. On a scale of 1-5, 5 being difficult and 1 being easy, how difficult did you find doing the blog project?
3. Did you enjoy the project? Why/why not?
4. What aspects did you dislike about the project?
5. How did you feel about your teacher's comments on your blog?
6. How much time/effort did you put into the project?
7. Did you meet the requirements of the project?
8. Did you feel that you were communicating through journal (why/how/with who?)
9. Have you kept a journal blog before?
10. What do you think are the advantages of doing a blog?
11. How did you feel about other students' comments on your blog?
12. Did you use pictures/ visuals to express yourself in your blog?
13. What did you learn from the project?
14. How can the project be better?
15. Will you continue writing on your blog in the future ?
16. Can I keep your print and use it in this project?

(Footnotes)

\* Kathy is the instructor