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EXTENDING WRITING INSTRUCTION BEYOND SCHOOL WALLS

Introduction

Perceived, until recently, as a powerful research and communication tool, the internet with new web publication systems has manifested itself as more than just a readable and searchable device. By changing the role of the users from simply readers into writers on the web, publishing opportunities have been redefining ways of using the internet in language teaching as well (Richardson, 2004). One of the applications redefining the place of the web in language education is what is called weblogs. This paper discusses weblog use in language teaching with a focus on what weblog offers in writing instruction.

Weblog Use in Language Teaching

At present a weblog in its most general sense, is an easily manageable webpage for people to write whatever they want with an opportunity for interaction with any internet user through its comment option. Dave Winner (2001), who has the longest-running blog on the net, defines it as “often updated sites that point to articles elsewhere on the web, often with comments and on-site articles. A weblog is a continual tour with a human guide who you get to know ”. Similarly, Lankshear and Knobel (2003), referring to Blood (2002), define blogs as “a special kind of website which is updated frequently with new postings and published in reverse chronological order; the most recent posting is on the top of the page (P.3). Though definitions vary, there is an agreement on general characteristics of weblogs:

- Weblogs enable personal editorship by attributing the whole responsibility to the blog owner (Cole, 2004; Glogoff, 2005).
- Through its hyperlinked post structure, a weblog allows the owner to reference to material outside the site (Paquet,2003; Du &Wagner, 2007)

- All weblogs are automatically updated with each new postings organized according to time (Walker, 2003; Efimova& Fiedler, 2004)
- A weblog allows for free public access to the content by enabling any internet user to see the blog via the World Wide Web (Paquet,2003; Huffaker, 2004)
- A weblog is a powerful tool for fostering interaction with its options for comment and reply (Eastment, 2005; Glogoff, 2005)

With these characteristics and with its user-friendly nature, weblogs have aroused attention among educators. Will Richardson, the founder of weblog-ed.com – a blog on using weblogs in education adapted weblogs into various educational areas ranging from classroom management, research logs to school portal and personal development spaces.

Likewise, Campbell (2003) discusses the possibilities of integrating weblogs into educational contexts, especially in the field of language teaching. He mentions three types of blogs that are likely to be beneficial for language learners. The first type is a *tutor blog* through which the class teacher can produce special texts by considering his/her own students' proficiency levels and guide his/her students in self study by directing them to language teaching websites. The second is a *learner blog* run by individual learners, which can be used as journals. The last type is *class blogs* which can serve like a free form bulletin board for learners to share thoughts on a common topic assigned as homework. It can also prove to be useful for an international language exchange.

Possibilities of weblog use in language teaching are only limited to the ability of the creativeness of the user, and although it can be applied to all language skills, weblogs seem to be an extremely valuable tool for current writing instruction in particular (since it is directly related to writing something).

A widespread approach in recent years in writing instruction is what is called the process approach, which is defined as “an approach that emphasizes teaching writing not as product but as process; helping students discover their own voice; allowing students to choose their own topic; providing teacher and peer feedback; encouraging revision and using student writing as the primary text of the course” (Matsuda, 2003 P.67). The main features of effective writing instruction favoured in a process approach can be summarized as multiple drafting with feedback between drafts, various forms of feedback (teacher, student and real

audience), free or journal writing, students' awareness of the writing process and of notions such as audience, voice and plans, providing students with publishing opportunities, and assessing the whole developmental process, not the single product (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). As a classroom activity, the process approach incorporates four basic writing stages **planning**, **drafting** (writing), **revising** (redrafting) and **editing** and three other stages externally imposed on students by the teacher, namely **responding** (sharing), **evaluating** and **publishing** (Seow, 2002).

Weblog with all its potentials seems to offer a lot to facilitate process oriented writing instruction. At the planning stage, students can be guided in gathering ideas to write through a tutor blog which directs them to the sites carefully chosen by the instructor. At the drafting stage, the learner blog provides students with places to share their writings through blog pages, and this will ease the feedback process. All the class members and the teacher can reach the drafts at any time and place so they can give feedback easily. Since the drafts are on the net, there will be no time restriction (as it is in a classroom context) and peers can examine the drafts as long as they want. Apart from reviewing their peers' writings, weblogs allow students to see the feedback given by the teacher to the other students and this is assumed to contribute to their understanding of successful writing.

The opportunities offered by weblogs are not restricted to only the teacher and peer feedback; it is also likely that an awareness of audience is aroused in the students depending on the open-to-anyone nature of the internet. The concept of audience is continually emphasized in process oriented writing instruction with the claim that when students know that what they have written will be read by someone other than the teacher, they will produce more meaningful and successful texts. However, in a school setting, it is not so easy to create opportunities for the students to write for a real audience. According to Ward (2004) when the students write only for their teachers "they may not only have difficulty adjusting their writing to fit the reader but may have trouble getting started because, aside from the final grade, what they write does not mean anything to them because it does not need to mean anything to anyone else"(P.3). Integrating weblogs into the course has the potential to change this situation since students will feel the possibility of being read by any internet user. When writing for a weblog, Kitzmann (2003) observes that "the (online) audience is not anticipated but expected, and thus influences and structures the very manner in which the writer articulates, composes and distributes the self document" (P.1). The awareness of audience provides a powerful tool for motivating the students to produce better writings.

Besides feedback sessions, weblogs seem to be useful in revision stages as well. By simply adding e-mail or instant messaging options to weblog software, the writing teacher can intervene and guide students during revision. Since students' writings will be saved in chronological order on their blog sites, a kind of electronic portfolio which can serve as an ideal tool for assessing the development in the students will occur. This aspect of blogging in the writing course is best described by Kennedy (2003), who states that "weblogs combine the best elements of portfolio-driven courses where student work is collected, edited and assessed with the immediacy of publishing for a virtual audience"(P.4). More important than all these is that a weblog supported writing course may contribute to students' awareness the of process-driven nature of writing. Continually updating a weblog may be helpful for the writing student to appreciate that writing is an ongoing process (Ward, 2004).

In addition to learner blogs, teachers can make use of blogging by setting a *tutor blog* through which they can provide their students with lots of materials internet includes, so they can create opportunities for extra studying for the students. Students can choose among the materials referenced by the teacher according to their own needs, and this will lead the individualization of learning. When the choice of material to study is left to the students, they will take much more responsibility for their learning and develop a sense of autonomous learning, which is assumed to increase success in writing.

However, weblogs in education, especially in writing instruction, is a relatively new application and our understanding of its benefits is mostly limited to theoretical information resulting from its potential offers (Du & Wagner, 2005). This makes it necessary to have a closer look at weblogs in writing and to measure its applicability.

The study

With the purpose of identifying the place of weblog in process oriented writing instruction, a course blending weblog activities with the principles of process writing is designed in the School of Foreign Languages, Karadeniz Technical University where the aim is to enable students to practice the language they have learned and to express themselves efficiently in well-organized paragraphs. The following is the course design which may prove to be a basic guideline for those that wish to incorporate blogging into writing instruction.

To integrate blogging into process based writing instruction, students are introduced to www.blogger.com, which is the most widely used blog hosting service (Stiler and Philleo,

2003). First of all, two different tutor blogs are constructed. The first one served as a kind of homepage containing the links to each student's blogs and all kinds of announcements. The second tutor blog is mainly used to direct students to the websites related to writing skills.

Apart from these tutor blogs, a number of learner blogs are set as well. Each student in the class set their learner blogs during a lab session under the guidance of the instructor. Students are required to create two different learner blogs on Blogger.com and are trained on maintaining their blogs. Each student is also sent an email including information about creating a post, revising and editing it, leaving comments and page design. One of the two blogs each student created serves as a place for publishing their writings and the other is used as a personal space where students reflected on their learning processes. These two blogs together made the online portfolio for each student.

The organization of the course is as follows: students are initially given information about the target paragraph type and two model paragraphs are examined in class together with the students. Then, vocabulary and the language structure necessary for the target type are studied and the students are provided with the exercises related to the topic during the class time. After students get theoretical information and a few exercises, tutor blogs come to stage. The students are directed, on the net, to the language teaching websites selected by the instructor according to their relevancy with the topic of the week to help them have much more practice on the necessary language structures and to gather ideas for their own writings. In the following in-class-hours, students are shown how to write a paragraph in the target type through teacher modelling by attaching special emphasis to how to choose the topic, do the prewriting activities and put the ideas in a paragraph. Then, the students are assigned to choose a topic to write about in the taught paragraph type. The pre-writing stage is realized during class time; however, all the other stages of the writing process are carried out on the net. Students are asked to write their first drafts and publish them on their blogs. After students publish their drafts on their blogs, they are asked to read their peers' drafts and respond to them through the comment option. Teacher feedback follows peer feedback. At the revision stage, the students are met on the net at a pre-identified time. As both the instructor and the students are able to see the drafts by means of blogging, they are guided in their revision of the drafts. After revising and editing their drafts, the students publish the final version of their paragraphs. At the end of the process, students are asked to write a reflection evaluating their learning process related to the target type in their blogs.

Conclusion

To disclose the potentials of blogging in language teaching, weblogs were incorporated into the writing course in which students were taught in accordance with the principles of the process approach. Through the use of weblog students had opportunities for publishing the written drafts easily, receiving feedback from both the teacher and their peers. Blogging also allowed them to give feedback to their peers and to see others' feedback. Additionally, weblog use increased the time for self study for the students by enabling them to easily reach materials on the internet.

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