Blogging in a teaching skills course for pre-service teachers of English as a second language

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Few question the benefits technology provides for learners, teachers and administrators. Yet, few touch on what undesirable effects it may have on individuals' educational and social wellbeing. Based on this premise, this study aims to provide a fair picture of a group of English Language Teaching (ELT) students reflecting on their experience drawn from a blogging facility used as a platform for sharing and commenting on peer performance in classroom setting. The participants consisted of prospective teachers of English who were being educated at the ELT Department of University of Çukurova, and received a two-term (eight months) course of *Teaching Language Skills* in 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years. Following each course session, participants were invited to make comments on a blogging platform; at the end of each term, all expressed individual perceptions on this experience, both on the blog and in face to face interviews, some coming up with positive and some with negative views. The study may have significant implications for courses aiming to make use of this facility as part of the syllabus.

Introduction

Computers and technology play a vital role in our personal and professional lives, and they have become an almost inseparable part of the classroom (Carrier, 1997; Dudeney, 2000; Warschauer, Healey, 1998; Zorko, 2009). They should fit appropriately into each lesson plan, and not be used just for display (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Technology ought to be used to enhance instructors' lesson plans and create interactive and motivating lessons for both teachers and students. The Internet, being a major product of technology, may be a contributory factor in shifting away from a communicative towards a context-based approach to language teaching pedagogy in an English language teaching (ELT) context (Warschauer, 2002). By using the Internet and the world wide web, students can have almost instantaneous access to a range of foreign experiences in their target language. While Web 1.0 based technology did probably developed upon this basis, with Web 2.0 we see the interactive aspect of education coming on stage.

Weblog (shortly, *blog*), being a component of Web 2.0, is a frequently updated website that often resembles an online journal. There are some types of this facility utilised in an ELT context. The *tutor blog*, for instance, is run by the teacher of a class. The content of this type can be limited to the syllabus, course information, homework, assignments, etc.; students are normally restricted to being able to write comments to the teacher's posts. The *class blog* is a shared space, with teacher and students being able to write to the main area. It is best used as a collaborative discussion space, an extra-curricular extension of the classroom. Students can be encouraged to reflect in

more depth, in writing, on themes touched upon in class. They are given a greater sense of freedom and involvement than with the *tutor blog*.

The *learner blog* requires more time and effort put by the teacher to both set up and moderate, but is probably the most rewarding. It involves giving each student an individual blog. The benefits of this are that it becomes the *students' own personal online space*. Students can be encouraged to write frequently about what interests them, and can post comments on other students' blogs. There are numerous reasons as to why one may choose to use weblogs with students. One common reason is providing a real audience for student writing. Usually, the teacher is the only person who reads student writing, and the focus of this reading is mostly on form, and not on content. With weblogs, students can find themselves writing for a real audience that, apart from the teacher, may include their peers and students from other classes (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). Other reasons are providing extra reading practice for students, sharing learner journals that can be read by peers, guiding students to online resources appropriate for their level, increasing a sense of community in class, encouraging shy students to participate, stimulating out of class discussion and a process-writing approach, storing an online portfolio of student written work, and helping build a closer relationship between students in large classes (Kaye, 2006).

The benefits that can be drawn from online interaction are well illustrated in Yang, Chan, Ho and Tam's (2005) study, where the authors investigated how students responded to each other in an e-community learning situation. They concluded that students found a forum discussion useful toward their formal curriculum since they learn more effectively when they learn through their own initiatives. World wide web resources could have enormous potential in this direction supporting the integration of culture as well in the foreign language curriculum (Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Singhal, 1997). Studies have shown that blogging, a tool of Web 2.0, may be used effectively for educational purposes (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; O'Donnell, 2006; Xie, Ke & Sharma, 2008; Sollars, 2007; Philip & Nicholls, 2009; Hourigan & Murray, 2010).

Moreover, Pinkman (2005) states that blogs give students more control over their own learning, and, when created by students themselves, they can also provide ownership of personal space and sense of belonging, not so easily achievable in class environment. In Farmer, Yue and Brooks' (2008) study, blogging may be perceived as a valuable asset, enhancing learning strategies of large cohort university teaching. However, this tool is not free from some negativity due to its mandatory nature of tasks and requirement of more explicit directions and validation in the writing of students' own academic blogs (Hourigan & Murray, 2010). Similarly, Philip and Nicholls (2009) underlined another negativity where blogs may require overload for the course instructor in order to read, cross-reference and mark entries. Blogs also are viewed as problematic in certain areas, mostly in the field of writing where it may lead to a hasty, informal and non-academic mode of discourse.

Viewed from its positive aspect, blogging is one significant facility providing a platform for a learning atmosphere to develop, since in this study, it embodies the characteristics emphasised by Kolb (1984, p. 38): *concrete experience* (or "DO"), *reflective observation* (or "OBSERVE"), *abstract conceptualisation* (or "THINK"), and *active experimentation* (or "PLAN").

The first stage, *concrete experience* (CE), is where the learner actively experiences an activity such as a lab session or field work. In this particular study, some participants

presented in classes, others observed, and following these activities they changed roles, in that *observers* become *doers*. The second stage, *reflective observation* (RO), is when the learner consciously reflects on one's own as well as on peers' experiences. The third stage, *abstract conceptualisation* (AC), is where the learner attempts to conceptualise a theory or model of what is observed. The fourth stage, *active experimentation* (AE), is where the learner tries to plan how to test a model or theory or plan for a forthcoming experience. The blog experience we provided for our participants forms a basis for this fourth stage, in that the participants who observed and commented on their peers' presentations on the blog, were able to read others' comments, and taking into account the criticism, plan their own presentations for forthcoming classes. Thus, with this study, we aimed to find out about whether this blogging experience was pedagogically beneficial in an ELT context and totally free from negativity. Believing that this experience was not wholly positive, we sought responses to the following questions:

1. Was the blogging experience beneficial for the participants in this study? If so, in what ways?
2. Was blogging in any way perceived negatively by participants? If so, what negative aspects were highlighted?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 130 third-year pre-service students (98 females and 32 males) at the ELT Department of Univ**e**rsity of Cukurova, who were all receiving the *Teaching English Skills* course at the time of the study. The participants, all Turkish, ranged from 20-21 years of age, and had an upper-intermediate level of English as assessed by a university entrance exam they took prior to their placement in their present department. During their three-year education, the participants have already taken the four skill courses such as *Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking* as well as *Teaching English Skills, Linguistics, English Literature, Methodology, Classroom Management, Computing Skills, Public Speaking, Counseling, Turkish,* and *History.* All participants, upon graduation, will be awarded with a BA degree in teaching English as a foreign language, and will be functioning as English teachers at state or private educational institutions.

Procedure in a blogging-based course

The course, *Teaching Skills of English* consisted of a two-hour lecture, and two-hour students' presentation sessions, a total of four hours per week. Students were allowed to enter comments on the blog, created for the course (see Figure 1), until 5:00 pm the Sunday of each week. Course evaluation and scoring were made taking into account students' self-evaluation (10%), peer evaluation (50%), and a final exam score (40%). In their self and peer evaluation, students met the requirements mentioned by the course instructor (who also is the researcher). The requirements for presenters were (1) covering the major points mentioned in the related lecture and making a reflective and analytical contribution to lecture and class discussions, (2) including a clear and academic layout, (3) following standard APA guidelines regarding mechanics of language, (4) including a reference section, and (5) effectively utilising supporting material that could enrich and enhance content of the presentation.

During presentation sessions, all students took notes based on the evaluation criteria and then entered their comments on the blog. In order to not affect students' comments, the course instructor entered her comments following students' entry deadline regarding presentations.
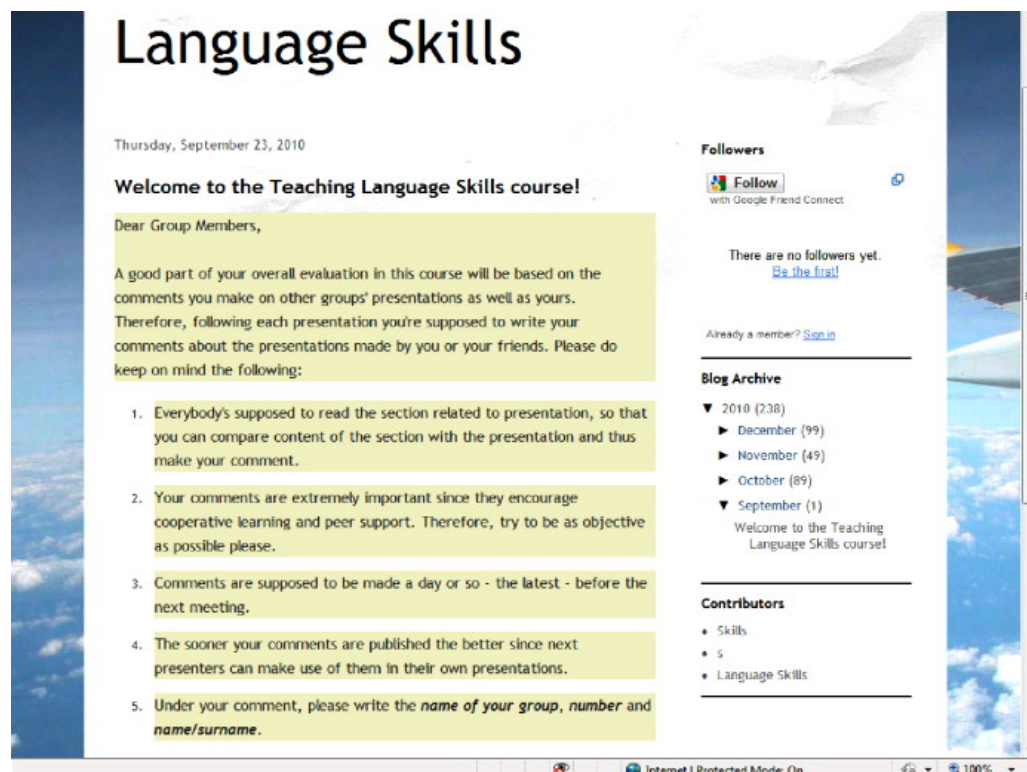

Figure 1: Blog for the course *Language Skills*
In this and other figures, student names have been erased to preserve anonymity.

We had three stages throughout the course delivery: (1) syllabus design and topics assignment, (2) topic presentations by students, and (3) the blogging experience. These are detailed below.

Stage 1: Syllabus design and topics assignment
A syllabus was designed in line with the textbook, *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (Harmer, 2001) and each week, participants were assigned a specific topic accordingly. The topics in the textbook were *Language, Theories, Methods and Techniques, Learners and Teachers, Managing Learning, The Changing World of the Classroom, Managing Learning, The Changing World of the Classroom, Focusing on the Language, Language Skills, Planning and Syllabuses, Evaluation, Learner Autonomy* and *Teacher Development*. Each topic, chosen by students themselves, was presented by two individuals following a two-hour lecture session. Dates of presentations were set according to the placement of topics in the syllabus.

Stage 2: Topic presentations by students
Students, having shared the presentation topics among themselves, integrated theory and practice presenting for 40-50 minutes by observing the criteria set by the instructor. Presenters initially gave very brief introduction to their activities in their presentations (usually slide presentations) and invited students in class to participate in these activities they were to conduct. All class members participated in such activities. The instructor, just like other participants, took notes, later to post her comments on the blog following each presentation.

Stage 3: The blogging experience
A blog was created and permission of access was granted to groups. Since all students in the class had basic knowledge of computing skills (a computing course of 4 hours for two academic terms was delivered to students in their first year of education), it was not difficult to introduce this facility to students. During the first week of the course, all students were given information about the blogging process regarding lectures and presentations. They were invited to a computer lab where all students were assigned email accounts, and were given instructions regarding blogging, how to follow blogs and how to paste comments on blogs about presentations of their peers as well as theirs. They were informed that contributions to blogging (including times of comment entry and adherence to deadlines) would be a considerable part of their overall course evaluation; another significant part was the content of posted comments (in line with introduced criteria), that is comparison of the content of a presentation with the theoretical issues stated in the assigned course book.

All students read chapters related to their as well as peers' presentations, and posted comments on the blog within the same week following each presentation of their own as well as their peers'. Next, presenters, relying on and benefiting from such comments, came up with the content of their own presentations of assigned topics. Students wrote their names, groups and numbers indicating their identity. All participants were given the opportunity to respond to comments made about them on the blog in the last class session of each week.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study was collected through (1) *interviews* and (2) *blog entries* (318 entries in 2008-2009 and 238 entries in 2009-2010 academic years; 656 in total). The analysis of all emerged themes (13, positive; 6, negative) concerning utilisation of the blog as an integral part of course delivery was based on students' comments gathered throughout 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years. Each participant was interviewed in order to observe whether what was stated in the blogs did match the voiced views. The interview, conducted in English, with a total duration of about 375 minutes (approximately 5 to 7 minutes per student), was performed face to face at the end of the semester. During the interviews, the following issues were taken into account.

- One question was asked at a time.
- The interviewer verified unclear responses.
- Students were asked open-ended questions (see Appendix) such as:
  What benefits did you get from this blogging experience?
  Did you encounter any difficulty in entering your comments?
  What negative aspects do you think that this experience posed for you?
- Leading questions were avoided; unbiased questions were preferred.

A content analysis was conducted for all 656 blog comments and the 375 minutes duration of the data gathered from interviews, which were transcribed for this purpose. Comments and transcriptions were perused for recurring themes, and additionally, in order to substantiate the analysis procedure, common themes were later assigned numerical values, and a frequency test was run to identify most commonly occurring themes. Valid percentages were taken into account for data interpretation. A chi-square test was also run in order to observe any significant differences in the dispersion of overall themes, using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) v.11.

The blogging experience was viewed by participants to have positive as well as negative aspects. For the former, thirteen, and the latter six common themes emerged out of the comments on the blogs, and the interviews. Regarding the themes of the positive aspects (see Table 1), the theme *writing improvement* (17.4 %) emerged with the highest percentage. Participants emphasised that blogging formed a solid ground in improving their writing skills. Illustrative verbatim sentences are presented below:

> We have the opportunity to write and improve our weak aspects in writing.

> Each time I entered my comments I improved my writing skills, and eliminated my mistakes by realising and correcting them.

Table 1: Contribution to personal and academic self

Contribution to personal and academic self	%
1. Writing	17.4
2. Self evaluation	11.8
3. Technology	10.9
4. Peer to peer feedback	10.9
5. Communication	9.3
6. Autonomy	8.5
7. Critical thinking	8.0
8. Cooperation	6.3
9. Motivation	5.7
10. Review and retention	3.7
11. Objectivity	3.3
12. Outside class interaction	2.4
13. Originality	1.7
Chi-square result	p=0.000

Self-evaluation (11.8%) was highlighted as a significant contribution to reflective learning. A similar observation was made by Hourigan and Murray (2010) and Park et al. (2011), where blogs were seen to develop reflective learning strategies. As was indicated previously, participants also commented on their own presentations (see Figure 2). This process was found by participants to be very effective in raising awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. In reality, we usually avoid evaluating ourselves; we mostly expect others to do this for us, which may be useful in self-improvement; however, what probably is more useful though is when we ourselves, endeavour to do this in an unbiased, objective way. Regarding this theme, we can cite the following excerpts from interviews:

> By means of commenting on presentations on the blog, we can talk about our deficiencies and mistakes and also have the chance of free self-expression.

> Thanks to blogging, I learned many things and evaluated my presentation accordingly. Also I was able to notice my mistakes and correct them on my own.
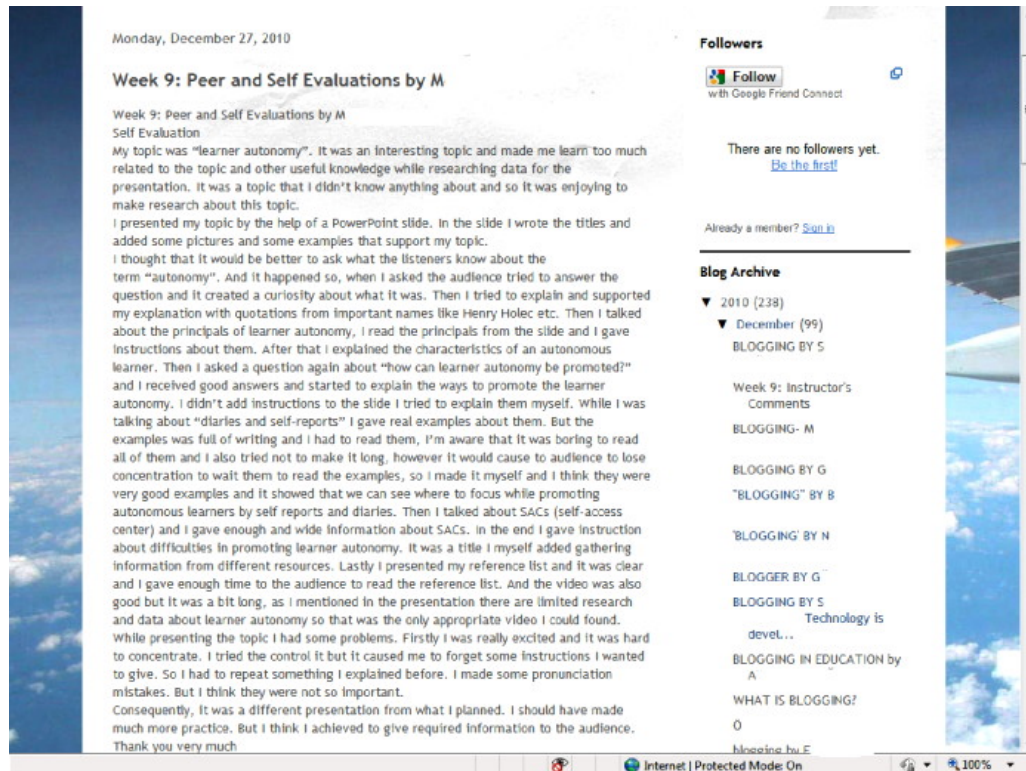
Figure 2: Self evaluation

Another contribution of the blogging experience was expressed concerning *peer to peer feedback* (10.9 %), and *use of technology* (10.9 %). As was also observed by Zorko (2009) and Philip and Nicholls (2009), collaborative learning can be enhanced through the use of technological tools such as the wiki in Zorko's study, and through blogs in ours and Philip and Nicholl's (2009) research, where the facility also formed a convenient platform for peer to peer feedback (see Figure 3), which implies that students developed a sense of community and benefited from such an experience by means of group support. This result is in line with the hypothesis of scaffolding where support enables learning and makes it more meaningful. Also, during non-formal interview sessions, the participants stated that they received comprehensible input from each other since their language level and interests were similar.

The participants also believed that they improved their computer skills in this specific course based on blogs, as each week they were expected to use a computer and the Internet. Since they entered blogs regularly, we believe that this experience may have improved their reading and writing skills as well their lexicon. The variety of comments pertaining to a certain topic provided a plethora of language use. Regarding objectivity, however, we reserve doubts that they were fully objective in their assessments. Below are some statements from the interviews.

> Our friends paid attention to our remarks and we had the opportunity to correct ourselves.

Blogging develops our one crucial skill – the ability to share. We can share ideas among all class members.

This class introduces the technology – Blogs, an interactive platform, enables us to share information.

Internet blogging taught us how to use technology in our classes and how to enjoy technology.

Language Skills

Sunday, December 26, 2010

WEEK 9 PEER EVALUATIONS BY N

PEER EVALUATION FOR E
Your presentation topic was "Planning Lesson." You mentioned about planning, paradoxs and then you explained what should be accounted while planning lesson such as students' needs, students' interests, students attention span.. They are really crucial factors that affect planning lesson.You gave information about sequences of a lesson. In my opinion your presentation was including all details of the topic. You supported your presentatin with colorful and interesting pictures. Your reference page was clear. YOU HAD THE VIDEO that was absolutely covered nearly all the information you gave..YET, during the presentation, you could speak much more understandable. WHEN you spoke quitely, the audience got bored. Sometimes I could not hear you clearly. YOUR intonation was weak, you could have been more effective.
This is the negative point I can say for your presentation. You should use your body language more effectively. I appreciated your efforts. OVERALL it was a good job. THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Followers

Follow
with Google Friend Connect

There are no followers yet.
Be the first!

Already a member? Sign in

Blog Archive

▼ 2010 (238)
  ▼ December (99)
    BLOGGING BY S

Figure 3: Peer evaluation

Communication is a theme highlighted by 9.3% of participants as a means of provision of extensive class work. Similar benefits were also expressed by Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008), where the researchers stated that if educational blogging resources are used properly, they can form a basis for fruitful interaction among university students. Some participants in our study indicated that although they were initially sceptical about the use of blogging, in time they began to benefit from it as an effective tool of communication. Some excerpts from the interviews illustrate this:

The blog is a great idea and it is helpful for communication.

We can communicate and learn from each other through the blog. It enables us to interact on an open platform.

Autonomy (8.5%) is also one of the benefits of the blogging facility, in that the participants agreed that they felt responsible regarding their tasks; and they attributed this sense of responsibility to the blog. The participants felt not only feel responsible to the teacher by responding to a certain task, but also they developed a sense of ownership about partly running and regulating the flow of the course. Both the results concerning this item and the data in the interview sessions indicate that they felt autonomous in deciding when and how to write their comments on the blogs. Moreover, they added that they easily worked on the language without any help from the lecturer, and this developed their self-confidence. The following statements exemplify the participants' views regarding this theme:

It gave us the responsibility of going to courses regularly and observing our friends more carefully. In this way, we learned how to be autonomous.

We all felt responsible to ourselves while commenting on our as well as others' presentations.

In this experience, initially the participants analysed theoretical as well as practical knowledge, and then wrote about peers' presentations, which may have led to some improvement of their *critical thinking skills* (8.0%), particularly while reading peers' writing and responding to it. In the interview sessions, commenting on each other's work with no biased opinion, they also added that they developed *thinking critically* within a theoretical framework. Below are cited some sentences from participants' comments:

We learned how to criticise in a fair way with writing comments. Also we see our mistakes that we made by reading the comments.

The comments have enriched my development in way of thinking.

Although with small percentages, themes such as *cooperation* (6.3%), *motivation* (5.7%), *review and retention* (3.7%), *objectivity* (3.3%), *outside-class interaction* (2.4%), and *originality* (1.7%) emerged with some positive contribution to participants' improvement. By enthusiastically working on each others' presentations both in class and on a blog platform, participants felt that they were being of significant help for each other's academic improvement. A similar observation was also made by Philip and Nicholls (2009), where the researchers found that students created a collaborative public contribution to the blogging space which tended to lift the level of engagement beyond that which is commonly found in individual reflective journals. Attendance at class and engagement in our case was also realised to a greater level; and this was illustrated by the emergence of the *motivation* theme as a contributing factor in the blogging experience. *Reviewing* their own and others' presentations and related comments, participants stated that they were also able to digest the targeted topic of the week. During this process, they illustrated that they paid much attention to being *objective*. However, maintaining objectivity in one's own comments was not convincing enough for other peers to enable them to be appreciative in their effort. Having a look at the negative aspects of the blogging experience, we can see *lack of objectivity* emerging as one of the leading negative themes.

With *outside-class interaction*, participants felt autonomous to a certain extent, especially in deciding what to present for the week's topic and how to present it. They became aware of their abilities, as to what they could and could not do during this process in and outside the class environment. They added that they were able to criticise or praise themselves without any external intervention. They expressed that this type of instruction provided them with a relatively novel and *original* way of learning and self improvement. Park et al. (2011) also suggested that, by means of blogging, adult informal learning could be strengthened, and blogging could thus be embedded in learning environments. Some excerpts from the participants' comments illustrate these themes:

As a class we have had a public diary where we cooperated with each others.

The blog is an excellent way to motivate students. However, you need to spend a great deal of time to get maximum support.

> The blog eases the understanding of the topics covered. It serves well as a review.

> I tried to be objective in my evaluation of self and my friends. I added my negative sides as well as positive sides on my posts on blog.

> I studied myself, which improved my academic and professional skills.

> In a normal classroom atmosphere all of us could not have a chance to make comments about each others' performances due to limited time, but through blogging we could easily express our ideas.

The blogging experience was by no means free from criticism. As can be observed from Table 2, participants produced six common themes regarding negativity, the most prominent ones being *technical problems* by 24.1%, *monotonous experience* by 23.3%, and *abuse of blogging* by 19.0%. While some students experienced *technical problems* such as not being able to have access to the Internet in time of need, owing to frequent disconnection problems, some others complained of the activity as being very *monotonous* for they were supposed to enter comments twice a week. They felt bored in writing on the blogs since they felt obliged to do so regularly each week, which was perceived as a *monotonous* activity. They stated that they would have felt much more relaxed if they had not been assigned this activity as a regular, weekly task. Students felt that it became a boring routine. Some participants thought that the experience could give way to *abuse* such as being tempted to copy peers' remarks on the blog while stating an opinion. Regarding these themes, we cite the following statements from blog entries and the interviews:

> Some students stay in the dormitory and they have limited time to access Internet.

> Even if we find a computer we cannot always find web connection. It is most important disadvantage of blogging.

> Doing the same task writing comments may be boring for the students since it is constant and obligatory in a semester. We may feel bored most of the times.

> The blog may sometimes be tedious.

> Any student can copy others' comments and write a comment as if it is hers or his.

> Blogging makes it possible to copy other people for some learners who choose the easiest way: to copy and to paste. So, this can hinder students from creating their original work.

Table 2: Negative aspects of the blogging experience

Negative aspects of the blogging experience	%
1. Technical problems	24.1
2. Monotonous	23.3
3. Abuse of blogging	19.0
4. Feeling of offence	11.7
5. No immediate feedback	10.9
6. Lack of objectivity	10.9
Chi-square result	p=0.000

Feeling of offence by criticism (11.7%) is a theme worth considering here. No matter how objective participants may be in peers' assessment, the language used in comments may be too harsh, which naturally may offend the presenter. This is a significant point which should be highlighted by instructors so that some hedging devices could be

used when commenting on each other's presentations. Related statements of participants are presented below:

> I felt anxious while writing comments about my friend's presentation since I had to tell the truth. Writing about poor performance may be irritating.

> I felt upset while reading negative remarks about my presentation on the blog entries. However I should admit that I can correct my mistakes after reading those remarks.

> You may feel a bit pessimistic while reading peer's remarks about your presentation and yourself. Some people do not love to be criticised by other people.

> I feel if I write bad things about my friend's presentation blogs, he or she will be humiliated and then she or he may not speak with you again since some people do not love to be criticised by other people.

What students in this class expected to see was *immediate feedback* (10.9%) from peers and the lecturer, but the latter would not do so, for fear of serving as a model thus restricting them to adopting her opinion, which might have endangered creativity and led to biases in participants' writing on the blogs. Therefore, immediate feedback by the lecturer was avoided on purpose. However, at the end of presentations, the instructor gave feedback on each participant's presentation following students' entry deadline and in class. Excerpts concerning this theme are presented below:

> While I was making presentation, I needed my instructor to warn me about my mistakes on the spot.

> I wanted to have live discussion in class during and after my presentation instead of sharing it on the blog platform.

Another negative aspect is *lack of objectivity* (10.9%). Participants felt that they were not able to be objective in commenting due to close relationships amongst class mates. They stated that affective factors hindered them from being objective in peer evaluation regarding certain aspects. Most notably, emotional status of the participants may have gotten in the way of their objective assessment. Additionally, sense of group belonging may also have played an important part in a fair evaluation and assessment.

> Our comments may not reflect the reality; they may include biased remarks so we cannot know whether it is true or not.

> Sometimes, it was difficult to understand peers' comments because some of them were ambiguous.

Discussion and implications

This research, which dealt with blogging as an integral part of a course titled *Teaching Language Skills*, focused on what a weblog is and how it can be utilised as a major contribution to academic classes. Based on this, the research was conducted with an aim to discover (1) the advantages and (2) the disadvantages as perceived by participants. Despite the emergence of a considerable number of positive themes, the blogging experience in this study was not free from negative aspects. However, participants indicated both in blog comments and interviews that the experience was overall very useful in that it helped improve certain skills such as *writing, self evaluation, technology use*, etc.

As for pedagogical use of blogging, *writing* in English, as was stressed by participants, was the primary skill to be fostered by this experience. This benefit was highlighted by a significant percentage (17.4%) among other themes by participants (p=0.000). A similar observation has been made by other researchers such as Ferdig and Trammell (2004), O'Donnell (2006), and Bruns and Jacobs (2006). The participants in this study stated that the frequency in writing triggered their second language production since each week they had to post their comments on the blog.

As a second major benefit, *self-evaluation* (11.8%) emerged as an important theme in this study. Participants believed that the blogging experience helped them to reflect and thus notice their strengths and weaknesses by evaluating themselves. By realising weaknesses, participants stated that they carried out extensive work to obtain academic knowledge and strengthen skills. This can be regarded as one more benefit in addition to the already existing ones noted in the literature, particularly, the benefit of *self expression* as cited by Williams and Jacobs (2004), and Burgess (2006).

Use of technology (10.9%) is another major benefit the blogging experience has yielded in this study. A significant number of participants stated that thanks to blogging they were able to discover new facets of technology. The blogging opportunity opened new doors of *peer to peer* (10.9%) communication to many who had not previously been familiar with this aspect of the Internet. Feedback was extended outside class, and was given at anytime at the convenience of the blogger. This benefit was significantly highlighted by participants of this research.

In addition to these benefits, with varying percentages, participants discovered a new channel of *communication* (9.3%); felt more *autonomous* (8.5%), more able to think *critically* (8.0%), more *motivated* (5.7%), more able to *review and retain* academic knowledge (3.7%), more *objective* (3.3%), more able to *interact outside class* (2.4%), and more *original* (1.7%). Besides such benefits, this study also revealed some negative aspects of blogs. For instance, *technical problems* emerged as a major theme of negativity. A considerable percentage (24.1%) of participants expressed views on negative effects of limited access to the Internet, disconnection, and unfamiliarity with efficient utilisation of this utility. Due to widespread use of the Internet in many other locations, a similar theme is probably less likely to emerge in studies conducted elsewhere. However, in a study conducted by Žorko (2009), the participants also indicated similar "technical glitches" such as problems related to editing and saving texts.

Some participants (23.3%) found the blogging experience rather *monotonous*, stating that twice a week they were supposed to post comments, and that this, after a while, became tedious and boring. This is an expected outcome following the completion of a task assigned partially against free will. Despite the fact that the mandatory nature of a task may not render it monotonous, there is always the potential that a task carried out against free will may lead to monotony, which may be surmounted with a variety of enjoyable tasks and rewards such as being voted the most effective comment of the week in terms of content, objectivity, layout, register and evidence. A study conducted by Hourigan and Murray (2010) also indicates that students may feel some reluctance towards blogging due to the mandatory nature of tasks.

The theme *abuse of blogging* indicates the temptation to copy and paste peers' comments. Participants, by 19.0%, expressed views that they at times were tempted to do this. Thus, we believe it is of utmost significance for the instructor to follow and

read thoroughly each student's comments, and detect such abuses. This way, individual originality as well as creativity of students will be encouraged. Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008) cite an excerpt which illustrates that blogging which was supposed to be used for educational purposes, may instead be misused as non-academic mode of discourse.

Among negative aspects of blogging so far indicated in literature, we could not see the theme *feeling of offence* being expressed by any scholar. Participants in this study (11.7%), stated that they were offended by what they found written about themselves by their peers. This is an extremely significant point and should duly be taken into consideration by course instructors aiming to embed the blog into their courses. The fact that this theme emerged with this particular group of participants in Turkey may suggest that no matter how much the criticism may be just and constructive, individuals may tend to take it as some kind of offence. High emotions may be acting as a prime factor for such a perception. Aware of such a cultural tendency, the instructor should, therefore, try to raise consciousness about some prominent hedging devices in writing.

One important negativity that emerged in this study is having *no immediate feedback* (10.9%). A considerable number of participants stated this lack to be a demotivating factor. In the literature, Hourigan and Murray (2010) have also observed that their participants did indicate the need for "explicit direction and validation" in their blogs. The observation made by Hourigan and Murray and in this research shows that no matter how effective and convenient technology may be in education, the need for face to face interaction and communication remains highly significant.

Lack of objectivity is another theme which also is not well-represented in the literature. Being completely honest regarding criticism was hindered for fear of offending the presenter. Participants stated that this type of self-restraint harmed their objectivity in their comments. However, we should indicate here that such an attitude cannot be fully attributable to technology use, since participants probably would have felt the same way even in a face to face educational environment.

Blogs can be used in English language teaching classes (as shown in this study) for raising language awareness and promoting learner development, as in many other subjects. Learners can overcome their fear of making mistakes and enhance their self-esteem via blogs, where they can adjust to their own pace. Moreover, blogging is an enjoyable activity attracting a strong majority of students keen on having their own websites. Being enjoyable, blogging enables students to use language outside class environment, as most EFL teachers desire to see coming from their students. Since they spend more time using their second language, students' schemata will probably get richer and richer. By doing so, they approach one step closer to being communicatively competent in the second language.

Teachers can provide individual feedback for individual learners; and learners can receive such feedback from classmates. Reading comments from teachers and peers may strengthen interaction among individuals. All this enables students to observe how their skills, particularly writing, have changed over time. The blogging experience may also be more motivating by integrating extrinsic motivation games like awarding the best of the week on the blogs, and giving a praise or gift to early birds with their blogs. The more fun students have, the more motivated they become in this process. In the presence of such triggering issues, students may treat the best blogger of the week

more objectively, and by this means, lack of objectivity can be avoided. In order for blogs to act as real forceful means of language education, teachers should certainly be equipped with the skills concerning the use of this facility so that they can integrate it into their syllabus.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the blogging experience here yielded both positive and negative aspects. Despite the fact that the benefits of this experience are significantly higher than negative points, the feedback received from participants suggests that negativity should seriously be considered in designing blog-based courses in an ELT context. The main contribution of blogging, as was expressed by participants, is enhancing writing and self evaluation, providing a platform for use of technology, reinforcing peer to peer feedback and communication. This facility enabled participants to reach into a real context in a virtual world, where technology is embraced in ELT classrooms in order to allow language teachers to do things which they are unable to do on their own, and to improve what is currently being done in the classroom. As we are exposed to a digital age, it is essential that we make sound decisions about how the Internet can be integrated most successfully into the language classroom, since we saw in this study that blogging enhanced individuals' personal and academic self.

However, negativity regarding the issues dealt with in this research can be tackled through continuous observation, training and awareness raising. For instance, while instructors may not be able to do much about technical difficulties such as access to computers outside the institution, they may collaborate with other departments so that computers, labs and workstations in those departments may be made available for the use of students. Abuse of blogging and lack of objectivity specifically require close attention and continuous monitoring by instructors in order to maintain utmost objectivity and least abuse. Lack of objectivity may also be tackled through training by instructors regarding criteria to be observed for an objective comment enhanced by supporting statements, provision of evidence and proof.

Additionally, feelings of offence may also be handled through training and consciousness raising, so that students can be made aware of the fact that an objective and a fair comment does not have to please an individual as long as it fits ethical and objectivity criteria. No matter to what extent we may be driven by our emotions and feelings, this should not be allowed to get in the way of individuals' receiving impartial feedback. Realising the benefits obtained from this technology, it seems inevitable that we, as researchers and classroom practitioners, should always be in search for better ways of utilising it, yet, while doing so, similarly always aware of its potential negative impacts on the individual.

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Appendix: Interview questions

What benefits did you gain from this blogging experience?

- in terms of personal development
- in terms of pedagogical improvement (such as language skills, language strategies, motivation, etc.)

Did you encounter any difficulty in entering your comments on blogs?

- in terms of technology
- in terms of content

What negative aspects do you think this experience posed to you?

What are your suggestions for the running of this course relying on a blogging platform?

Please do state your general views about this blogging experience.

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