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**"Theoretical and Practical Applications of
Emergent Technology in ELT Classrooms;
How the 'Blog' Can Change English
Language Teaching"**

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Abstract

The classic picture of the ELT (English Language Teaching) classroom is one in which there are rows of desks, a blackboard, students, a teacher, paper and pencils. Even with the advent of instantaneous information via the World Wide Web, the ELT classroom remains relatively unchanged. However, the winds of change are upon the ELT profession. Many educators are now taking advantage of the vastness of the Internet. Moreover, most teachers are using the Internet for planning, research and the exchange of ideas. There is so much more to be found and used. If harnessed correctly and constructively, the Internet can be a priceless tool for the ELT classroom. This paper will discuss current practices for reading and writing in the ELT setting, and more specifically, the use of 'web logs' or 'blogs' in the ELT classroom. First, a discussion covering common methods used in most ELT classes and move to a more progressive approach to alternative assessment, portfolio assessment, and journaling. Next, an explanation of this technology, its uses, and potential will be given. Finally, suggestions for use, ideas, and links will be listed. The sky is truly the limit where the ELT profession is going and it is an exciting time to be involved.

Introduction

For as long as there have been schools, teachers and students, there have been words. These words are represented by symbols and letters, the words connect together to form sentences and then into speech and writing. The job of the ELT teacher is to teach these concepts, and all the nuances that go with them, to the English Language Learner. The following paper looks at the traditional ELT classroom and then moves onto how content is taught and learned by second language learners. The topic of journaling and learning logs will be covered along with how educational technology is utilized in the ELT setting. Next, weblog history, it's meaning and uses will be explored. Finally, how easily an ELT educator can use blogs in your classrooms with little or no training. Adding more tools to the ELT 'toolbox of materials' is essential to effective ELT teaching and will benefit educators and learners.

The Traditional ELT Classroom

       As the use of English has increased in popularity (evident by the number of current English language training centers in operation worldwide), so has the need for qualified teachers to instruct students in the language. Most colleges and universities in most of the English speaking countries offer degrees and certifications in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Whether the pupil is learning for pleasure or out of necessity, the instruction is relatively the same. The instruction to English learners remains relatively unchanged today. It's true that there are teachers who use 'cutting edge' techniques and technology, but the majority of teachers still teach in the same manner of instruction that has been used for 20 or 30 years.

       Here is an example of the traditional ELT classroom: usually, it will have many desks or tables and a board (white, black, chalk or marker). The students will repeat what the teacher says and then, maybe, try on their own. Often the teacher will stand in front of the class and model how his/her mouth looks as he/she says the sounds, having the students also model this behavior. Sometimes, an audiocassette or CD will be played with words, sentences and stories for the students to hear native speakers speaking. Another popular activity in these classes is role-playing. Two or three students will practice together, having a simple conversation. After having ample time to practice, or memorize their various 'roles,' they will stand up, maybe go to the front of the class, and recite what they have just practiced with their respective groups.

       None of these activities are bad or damaging to the students. In fact, they have proven to be very useful. However, there are many more opportunities for students to gain confidence, practice, and extend themselves - especially for the ESL student who must learn the language for more than just pleasure. For students who are displaced for whatever reason or who are studying to go abroad, *content* is also an important factor.

Content Learning for English Language Learners

       In the ELT class, the instructor needs to put the language learning of the students as a high priority. There are many ways to accommodate this. Educators will have different theories and philosophies. According to Peregoy & Boyle (2001), the six elements that create optimal content learning for 'English Language Learners' are: *meaning and purpose, prior knowledge, integration of opportunities to use language and literacy for learning purposes, scaffolding for support, collaboration,* & *variety*.

       Meaning and purpose in each activity in the ELT class is of the utmost importance to the English learners. If the activity has meaning and purpose, then the learner will take ownership over it and then a sense of pride and confidence will result. Often the activities with 'real world' ties have the greatest impact. This is an element that should be present in ELT instruction from the youngest language learners to the eldest.

       Prior knowledge of a subject in their home language and culture allow students to create links to topics or activities in English. For example, when talking about traffic rules in an English speaking country, the second language learners can relate their own experiences in their home countries. Of course, this will only be meaningful to students with prior knowledge of the traffic laws and rules. If the learners are too young, their prior knowledge in many areas will be limited. If old enough, the learners can relate the

information from their experiences and often feel more connected to the learning community.

Integration of opportunities to use language and literacy for learning purposes is crucial to bringing concreteness to the abstract/theoretical concepts and ideas. This means that it is important to make room for learning opportunities to take place in order for students to put their newly acquired skills to work. If a teacher asks the students to review an article and share their findings with the class, the teacher is integrating chances for students to make light of what they are learning.

Scaffolding for support means that the teacher will first model the desired behavior, give assistance the first few times that the learners attempt the tasks, and finally, the learners will attempt on their own. This gives learners the skills and confidence needed to complete the assigned tasks. Scaffolding is not only used in ELT classes, but in many other subjects as well.

Collaboration is key to group learning and ultimately, to individual learning. Collaboration is used in modern offices and businesses globally. It has many ties to the skills needed to work with others in any endeavor that a person might undertake. There are very few instances in the 'real world' where there is not some degree of collaboration. Collaboration is of vast importance in the ELT classroom to encourage cooperation skills.

Variety is needed in lessons and activities to avoid burnout and boredom. From the adult learners of English to the youngest of learners, variety in their activities will spark creativity and excitement in almost all topics covered. When students walk into a classroom day after day and week after week, they expect some variety in their routine. If no variety is given, the students may plateau in their learning because of lack of interest.

All of these elements should be present in the ELT classroom for the educator to be effective. There are many activities in the ELT classroom that ELT teachers will use that support these points. Journaling is one of the most effective and commonly used activities for ELT and English classes alike.

Traditional Journaling and Learning Logs
The style of journaling a teacher prefers to use is inconsequential compared to the regularity of the activities involving writing and logging their thoughts and reflections. The student of English, native or not, needs constant practice and feedback. "Fluency, the ability to get words down on a page easily, can only come with writing practice and continued English language development." (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001) Journals or learning logs are a great way to find out a student's thoughts and ideas about a topic or activity. Often the most timid student is the most reflective writer.

Traditionally, these journals or logs have been kept on paper or in a book. It is paramount for students to have a record of their thoughts and their progress as a writer and user of English. The advent of computers, the Personal Digital Assistant or PDA, mobile phones, e-mail, and the Internet usher in a new world of recording ones thoughts. Why not take advantage of these technologies in the ELT classrooms? The next section, will discuss what teachers are doing in their classes in order that technology is used to the fullest extent.

Move to Educational Technology in the Classroom

What is technology? Technology is anything that extends human capability. By definition, paper clips and staples are forms of technology because they extend human capability. Nevertheless, paper clips and staples are 'low-tech;' audio, video, and computer driven tools are considered 'high-tech,' or commonly referred to as 'technology.'

Most people have an e-mail address or at least, know what e-mail is. When a person looks around the World Wide Web, the "Internet," there are advertisements everywhere for degrees and certificates in 'Educational Technology.' Educational Technology is using any form of technology (high-technology, by the above definition) in an educational setting, to assist teachers in their instruction.   From CD-ROM games for students to MS Power Point presentations to help explain a concept, idea, or topic, technology is here to stay so why are some teachers still afraid to use it?

The term 'technophobe' means a person who is afraid to use technology. Many teachers are technophobes. They are not certain or unaware that technology can help them to become better educators. It is true that not all technology is good and often can be counter-productive. However, an educator must be open to trying and evaluating new and emerging technologies to see where this might fit into their instruction. Whether or not a teacher knows it, their English language learners may be using and interacting with technology everyday. Therefore, teachers need to at least be aware of the impact technology is having on their learners.

Web logs and Their History

According to, *www.blogger.com*, the "Blogger" website (2004),

> *"A blog is a web page made up of usually short, frequently updated posts that are arranged chronologically — like a what's new page or a journal. The content and purposes of blogs varies greatly — from links and commentary about other web sites, to news about a company/person/idea, to diaries, photos, poetry, mini-essays, project updates, even fiction. Blog posts are like instant messages to the web."*

When ELT educators look at this definition, they will instantly see where this can fit in ELT classes. Individuals, families, groups, classes, departments, schools, universities, businesses, etc. are currently all using blogs. There are hundreds of sites offering 'free' blog accounts for anyone. Also, according to the "Blogger" website (2004),

> *"Blogs are also excellent team/department/company/family communication tools. They help small groups communicate in a way that is simpler and easier to follow than email or discussion forums. Use a private blog on an intranet to allow team members to post related links, files, quotes, or commentary. Set up a family blog where relatives can share personal news. A blog can help keep everyone in the loop, promote cohesiveness and group culture, and provide an informal "voice" of a project or department to outsiders."*

Rebecca Blood is the author of several articles and books on blogging. According to Blood's, *"Weblogs: A history and perspective"* (2000), she outlines the extremely short history of this budding new medium to share thoughts, ideas and opinions. According to Blood, in 1998 there were only 23 weblogs on the entire Internet. In

September 2000, there were 'thousands,' and with the numbers of users growing exponentially. According to "*Wired News*" reporter Shachtman, (2002), "…there are now more than 970,000 registered users of Pyra's popular Blogger software, up from 343,000 a year ago." Today, in 2004, there are probably millions.

Benefits of Using Blogs in ELT Classrooms
At this point, the reader may ask, "What are the benefits of using this technology if I do not know much about it?" The following reasons will assist in answering that question. The reasons used below are by no means exhaustive; they merely serve as a starting point to move teachers in the right direction.

- *Using technology is exciting for the learner*. English language learners like to use and take part in activities that are familiar to them. More often than not, the learner is already using technology or is eager to learn. The technology represents a 'fun' and 'interesting' activity.
- *Because blogs are a form of publishing, the learner will be 'published.'* The idea that a learner can publish their thoughts and ideas for the world to see is an exciting opportunity for the learner and the teacher. "A contraction of the term 'Web logging,' blogging can best be described as a form of micropublishing" (Roberts, 2004).
- *It creates a forum for the learner to be an individual*. As mentioned above, each learner will be an 'author.' For some learners that is a scary idea, but some of the quieter, more introverted learners are yearning for a stage of their own.
- *Teacher feedback can be given instantly in the form of comments or as a response to what the learner has written*. When the teacher posts a comment to an entry, the learner can read the comment instantly and even reply to the teachers posting. Learners of English need a lot of feedback and encouragement, and blogging would be an easy way to give them that 'instant' feedback they need.
- *Gives the learner confidence and pride in their work*. The learner can edit/delete/save their work. It is dated and logged chronologically. This allows students to actually see the progress they are making in English. Consequently, this will give them pride and increase their confidence in using the language.
- *The teacher, as administrator, has control over the content of the blog*. With blogging technology, the administrator (teacher) has sole management of the site. The teacher can add or delete entries as they see fit. They can also decide who can and cannot be a member of the blog.
- *Can lead to a life-long habit of journaling for the learner*. Through the use of blogs, learners should acquire a habit that is positive and will enable them to continue to grow in self knowledge and the knowledge of the world around them.
- *Makes the learner more prepared for future educational and professional opportunities*. While aiding with their English, the teacher is also assisting the learner to obtain new skills that will be very important in future educational and professional opportunities. The skills learned while blogging such as typing, editing, putting thoughts into words are essential for success beyond the ELT classroom. The learners will be able to use these skills throughout school and in the workplace.
- *Uses prior skills and knowledge (for some learners) and creates an opportunity for them to put that knowledge and skills to use in an academic setting*. Many learners

are already using the relevant technology at home or in school so blogging will enable them to express themselves in a medium in which they are familiar.

- *Provides an opportunity to individualize instruction for multi-leveled classes.* In most, if not all ELT classes, there are learners with varying levels of English. Blogging allows for differentiation.
- *Allows for flexibility in the schedule of the learner and teacher.* Being the very nature of the Internet, there are no set hours of operation (it never closes). So the learners can 'log on' at any time of the day or night. Learners can use blogs whenever they are in the writing mood. The same applies to the teacher.

This is not to suggest that an instructor should abandon journaling on paper. Blogs can simply add much-needed variety for the learners in the ELT classroom. Blogs are a great tool in the ELT teachers' repertoire.

Limitations and Possible Fixes of Blogs for Educational Use
With every activity in the ELT setting there are drawbacks and constraints. Blogs are no exception. The following list of reasons is also not exhaustive, but highlights some of the most obvious limitations to using Blogs, and how a teacher might work around them.

- *Connection options.* What happens when the learners cannot access the Internet at home or school, or their connection speeds are too slow to handle the information being passed along? Teachers who want to add blogging to their curriculum will immediately pose this question. As in other forms of teaching, instructors must always have a contingency plan. For example, some teachers might choose to allow students to work in pairs or small groups, while other teachers might arrange alternative options for individual students.
- *Software is not user-friendly.* If the teacher has piloted this web-logging package, then the potential problems in user-friendliness should have been assessed; however, there is still the possibility of problems with some users. The teacher will need to be prepared to do some scaffolding and one-to-one tutoring for learners that have difficulty or lack prior experience.
- *Some learners and teachers lack typing skills.* Some learners do not know how to type. Some students may not even want to learn. Ask the learner to have a try and if he or she is still have too much trouble, then more scaffolding from the teacher or assistance from a student stronger with typing skills.
- *Some learners are 'technophobes.'* As mentioned earlier, a technophobe is someone afraid to use technology. This may not be a problem with most young learners, but if a teacher is working with older learners of English, then it might become an issue. An easy way around this problem is for the teacher to plan on more scaffolding than with a younger group of learners. Modeling the appropriate behavior and adding in support where needed will help to soften the shock on the technophobe.
- *Lack of computer availability.* Some of the learners will not have access to a computer. One way to handle this is to clarify the hours for the school computer lab. If there is a computer in the classroom, the teacher can arrange a schedule for learners' to use the computer(s).

- *Learners cannot understand the instructions on the website.* This will be a problem area for the vast majority of English language learners. Because of their lack of interaction with the language the learner will struggle. This is where scaffolding is very important. It is also important that the teacher add extra demonstration time for the class. Being patient with the learner is also important during this foundational phase in their online learning.
- *Time constraints for the teacher.* The first attempt at running a blog with the students will probably be the most time consuming for the ELT teacher. "It should be said that the undertaking of an online journal project [blog] requires the teacher to have a certain amount of time available" (Stanley, 2004). However, as the students and the teacher become more familiar with the format and the system, they will all become more comfortable and the time involved with decrease.

Just like any other teaching activity or assignment, blogging has some limitations. However, these limitations should not outweigh the benefits of blogging. If the ELT teacher is committed and invested into making this project work, both the students and the teacher will benefit.

The 'Ins and Outs' of using Blogs
The first step for teachers is to try out blogging for themselves. In this scenario, teachers cannot expect their students to do something that they are not willing to do themselves. Each teacher will have his or her own reasons for starting a blog. These reasons must be clear or the blog will not serve the learner's language development. The blogs can be as general as a journal of daily thoughts, or be more specific in nature. The teacher should prepare beforehand, an activity that will be a catalyst for the language learner's needs. When the teacher has had a chance to try this out first, the next step will be to choose the most appropriate software. (In a later section there is a list of links and suggestions.)

Once the teacher has chosen a program, he or she will need to set up membership for each student with the blogger site. This is often free. (Many school systems are even setting up their own blogging sites.) Then the teacher, as the administrator of the site, must make a membership list of the students so they are able to comment on the teacher's entry. The next decision for the teacher is if the students should have their own page or to only allow the students comment on the teacher's page. By having his or her own blog page, the teacher is allowing the student to have a certain amount of control over the blog's appearance, content, membership, links, etc. If the learners are too young, it is probably best to let them comment on the teacher's page/entry. For the older learners (middle school aged and older) having control of his or her own page would be more plausible.

When the control of learners' pages is given to them, they will be able to adjust the look and feel of their blog. The learner will have the choice of various templates and formats for their page. They will have the ability to block or allow members to comment on their pages. When the learners feel comfortable with their blogs they tend to use it more. Once the learners are happy with their pages and the entries, they will continue to grow with pride and confidence.

Practical Uses of Blogs in the ELT Classrooms
        The discussion in this section covers three main uses of blogs in the ELT classroom. Alternative assessment, student portfolios, and what has been the major focus of this paper, journaling. As the needs of the English Language Learner continue to change and evolve, there are requests from educators, parents, and students for other forms of assessment. Blogging can be one of these styles of alternative assessment. It gives the learners the opportunity to demonstrate what they have been learning and their thoughts on a given topic, ideas, concepts, etc. The teacher can then read the entries on the learner's page, or those which have been posted on the teacher's page, giving feedback, and assessing the learner's progress.
        Portfolios are another use for blogs. The portfolio can include only written work or may include other work from class. The students can display their work from the past term, semester, school year, or even, in some cases, school career. By using blogs, the students can upload photos, work samples, include links to related work, etc. This can even serve to foster skills that will be useful in the future careers of the students. Many of the students can use their portfolios in the future to demonstrate their English abilities, and prove their writing skills. The teacher can, again, use this as a form of alternative assessment.
        The online journal is what is probably most appealing to the teacher. This is collection of often-updated entries. Here again is an example used earlier about the various traffic laws: Teachers might want to upload (or add to the blog) some photos of traffic signs and let the students comment on what they think the pictures represent. Then the students could elaborate on what might happen if the traffic laws pictured were violated. The teachers may want learners to compose their own story about something related to traffic. This is a simple example, but teachers would be using all six of Peregoy & Boyle's (2001) "elements that create optimal content learning for 'English Language Learners.'"

Suggestions and Links for More Information
        As educators considering using blogs in ELT classes, teachers will need a place to get started and to stay updated in their information and knowledge. Teachers can get started in many ways. There are several books on blogging available. By using any of the online bookshops, teachers can order and ship books anywhere in the world. For more ideas on starting out, teachers might find it generally easier to look to the millions of bloggers blogging everyday. It is quite easy to find out about education blogs and specific interests blogs. Merely type a search in your favorite search engine. One that is particularly useful is "*Schoolblogs.com*" (http://www.schoolblogs.com).   Free accounts are available for anyone who wants to join. Also, there are a multitude of resources on blogging and interest specific blogs. Another blog, that has a different style and feel, is "*mBlog.com*" (http://mblog.com). The users can choose from a wide variety of templates and styles for their blogs. Photos and links can be included to help supplement the blog, as well. Mobile devices, such as mobile phones and PDAs, can be used to transmit data to the mBlog account. This makes it very convenient to update blogs.
        After researching and starting a blog, it would be beneficial to read the article by Blood entitled, "*Ten Tips for a Better Weblog*" (2003). In it, Blood, outlines the top ten tips for better blogging. It can be useful reading for the teacher and the English learner.

There are terms and concepts that can make for lively class discussions. Staying updated in the blogging technology and current trends will help the teacher become more prepared and better equipped to smoothly run a blog.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, the benefits of blogging far outweigh the pitfalls. Ease of use and clean appearance are making the blog a major force on the Internet. Therefore, not just the teachers teaching English language learners but any teacher need to stay up-to-date with educational trends and should stay abreast with emergent technology that will drive this information age for years to come. Technology and education should go hand-in-hand and should not be separated because undoubtedly the learner will always use technology. Blogs are a great tool to achieve many goals for English language learners and, in the long term, what all teachers desire, authentic learning. With or without blogs, teachers of English language learners need to remember the goal of what they are doing. Educating is the number one priority.

Blogs may not replace the traditional 'hand-written' journals, but then again they might. However, the more options teachers offer learners; the more the needs of learners are met. The ELT classroom setting needs to evolve, and for many, blogs will be the first step in that evolution. By selecting the best attributes from the past experience and looking forward to the future will produce the strongest ELT instruction. Now is the time to take action and use technology to meet the ever-growing needs of English language learners.

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