

II. FROM PRACTICE

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Using Blogs for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

ABSTRACT. The main purpose of the study reported in this article is to find out from the didactic perspective what a blog is, how it can be effectively used in foreign language teaching and learning, and which competences can be developed by students using blogs. This article also aims to show whether blogs written by teachers motivate students to learn foreign languages.

KEYWORDS: blogs, education blogs, blended learning, integrated language learning, autonomy, medial competence, cultural competence, multimodal communication in foreign language classes, motivation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to start a discussion on how to place the term “blog” in relation to foreign language didactics as this subject is not widely covered in the specialist literature. The next question arises, whether a blog should be treated as a tool, or a new media hypertext or both. To answer this question it is important to describe the structure and content of various blogs. They differ in form and function, which makes attempts to define them even more difficult.

The observations on the role of blogs in modern foreign language didactics in this paper are based on a few popular blogs on learning German and English run by teachers. These examples will show how blogs influence foreign language learning and more specifically: how autonomous learning and communicative, language and intercultural competences can be developed by students working with different kinds of teacher-blogs.

2. DEFINITION AND ROLE OF A BLOG FROM THE DIDACTIC PERSPECTIVE

A blog is a kind of a diary written on a regular basis, which may refer to either one or more topics. According to Donath¹ (2010), a blog is a website which can be created and updated frequently. He argues that the possibility of updating blogs makes them a good communication tool. An unquestionable value of a blog is the ability to return to some parts of the content at any time and in any place, as long as a user has access to the Internet.

The Encyclopædia Britannica defines a blog as an “online journal where an individual, group or corporation presents a record of activities, thoughts or beliefs. Some blogs operate mainly as news filters, collecting various online sources and adding short comments and Internet links”², which classify them as hypertexts. These features can be on the one hand of value for linguists: “Firstly, based on them, one may analyse the development and change of blogs and the language of their users (bloggers) according to a chronological pattern, i.e. trace the changes back and systematize data to draw tendencies” (Polkovsky, Oleksiychuk 2010: 360). On the other hand, the possibility of placing content not only by the blog founder, or other authors whose texts can be accessed via links on a blog, but also by readers, implies difficulties in defining and analysing blogs. The problematic questions are:

- What should be considered as the content of a blog: all the texts linked or only texts written by the founder, including comments of readers?
- Who should be therefore perceived as the author of a blog?

The present paper concentrates on educational blogs, which are a useful tool with potential to elicit and sustain student motivation thanks to its multimodality. They also contribute to the development of student autonomy: “Blogs have been well received in education owing to their multimedia features, interactivity, and ability to support cooperative and autonomous learning” (Sun 2009: 88).

Lee (2011) maintains that blogs can be divided into two categories, due to their pedagogical purposes: personal blogs and collective blogs. The first type serves as a collection of online journals that enables the author to express and reflect him- or herself. The second one contributes to learning based on collaboration and interaction (Lee 2011: 87). These categories refer to blogs run by students. It is worth reflecting on how blogs run by teachers

¹ See <http://donathsf.wordpress.com/> (date of access 2.08.2012).

² <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/869092/blog> (date of access 20.08.2012).

could be divided. Existing studies on blogs have not accorded much attention to the issue of how to categorize blogs created and run by teachers. I propose at first to point out functions blogs may have in the process of foreign language learning, such as:

- organizing the learning environment,
- developing communicative, language and intercultural competence,
- fostering autonomous learning,
- motivating FL learning,
- promoting language awareness,
- ordering language knowledge, just to name a few.

Analysing blogs run by teachers, it is easy to notice that a single blog can possess multiple functions, so classifying them into specific categories is difficult, if not impossible. In order to present the didactic value of blogs, it seems more reasonable to concentrate on their functions. In this paper I will focus above all on two chosen aspects: motivating FL learning and fostering autonomous learning.

3. THE POTENTIAL OF BLOGS AS A MOTIVATIONAL TOOL FOR FL LEARNING

To understand why some blogs run by foreign language teachers have become very popular among students, it is important to examine briefly why and how blogs influence the motivation to learn foreign languages.

Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that teachers should support student autonomy and encourage learners to develop foreign language skills outside the classroom (Benson 2011; Bocanegra, Haidl 1999; Pawlak 2004; Wilczyńska 1999). Young learners, especially teenagers, are very often not motivated enough to learn foreign languages, because they do not see the possibility of using languages in the immediate future outside class. Adolescents rarely, if ever, have a chance to go abroad as part of a school exchange, so motivating them to learn languages should rather try to relate to their interests. Teachers can effectively encourage teen students to learn foreign languages using the media, because nowadays young people are growing up surrounded by new technological communication tools, such as blogs, social networks or communicators.

Blogs can possess a personal character and they form a sort of a platform where Internet users can meet at any time and exchange their ideas. In this case they have a social function, as they serve as a meeting platform for people of the same interests and/or similar attitude towards life. In terms of motivation to use a blog as an educational tool, this is an important aspect,

because young people have a strong need to express themselves as individuals. That is why weblogs can be used for educational purposes as well, such as teaching and learning foreign languages. Namely, they “can provide foreign language learners a venue in which they can reflect, comment, question, review, and communicate – outside the classroom in an authentic environment” (Pinkman 2005: 13).

Using electronic diaries in foreign language teaching and learning creates opportunities to broaden students’ knowledge of the language and culture of selected countries, which is not always possible in traditional classes because of time limits. Knowledge of cultural traditions and ways of life in selected countries, acquisition of insights into how members of other cultural and ethnic groups talk, think and behave, can have a motivational impact on the learning process.

An important factor influencing student motivation to learn is also the change of roles of teachers and students. The teacher’s task is to advise the student how to improve his or her performance in learning languages. The teacher-blogger does not evaluate in such a strict manner as he or she would in a conventional lesson, because his or her aim is, above all, to interest students in developing their language skills and not to assess.

On blogs, language learners can leave comments, mostly written, which is also a valuable asset in terms of foreign language learning, for the following reasons: most probably language learners prefer to leave a written comment than to say something. They do not feel time pressure, because they have enough time and they can be anonymous to the teacher. Jedynak (2011) claims that “although the communication between student and lecturer is virtual, in many cases it could be more comfortable for both than a traditional one in a lecture room”³ (Jedynak 2011: 14, transl. G.G.S.). The possibility to comment increases the engagement of students and consequently their motivation.

4. COMPETENCES OF TEACHERS RUNNING BLOGS

Writing a blog requires different abilities from teachers. They should be, among other things, capable of encouraging their students to learn autonomously: “Many foreign language instructors are now concerned (...) with preparing learners to take responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom” (Pinkman 2005: 12), so in order to develop student motivation

³ „Wprawdzie kontakt pomiędzy studentem a wykładowcą jest wirtualny, to w wielu przypadkach może on się okazać wygodniejszy dla obu stron niż tradycyjny kontakt w sali wykładowej”.

for autonomous learning, teachers should possess knowledge of learning strategies and the ability to implement them. They can exemplify them on their blogs. Moreover, they should be moderators and organisers of the learning process, as well as advisors, who can enable students to individualise their work and take into consideration learner interests, needs and cognitive endowments (Wiertlewska 2009: 165). Additionally, a teacher-blogger should be aware of how to communicate with a large heterogeneous group of learners, post regularly, and encourage visitors to leave comments. Writing a blog entails not only posting texts, but also administrating the website, organizing and placing content. In other words, a teacher must be familiar with all the important functions, tools and possibilities of a blog in order to attract learners. On the Internet, there are many guides how to start and run a blog (explaining where it can be hosted or what is the role of a domain name etc.)⁴. The technical features of blogs lie beyond the scope of this paper, but the teacher-blogger should be aware of their existence. Moreover, a teacher-blogger should definitely learn effective writing skills for the Internet. Hypertexts somewhat differ from traditionally published texts (Żebrowska 2013). According to Maciejewski (2009), for instance, perception and usability are of pivotal importance in the process of constructing a hypertext (Maciejewski 2009: 23). They should be brief, in order to avoid so-called cognitive overload, which can negatively affect reading (Szerszeń 2010: 134). It should also be emphasized that the creation of hypertexts in the form of a blog requires strong skills of integrated writing (associative writing), and hence the ability to build:

New hypertexts which have not only local coherence but also global coherence, integrating the writer's new contributions with existing ideas, structures, concepts, data, examples, descriptions, experiences, claims, theories suggestions, reports (etc.) that have already been published within the docuverse of a hypertext system (Miles-Board 2004: 17).

Media competence is also of crucial importance for a teacher who runs a blog. Media competence includes not only knowledge of, and critical thinking about the media, but also the ability to use and co-create them (Baacke 1996).

5. WHAT CAN A STUDENT LEARN FROM A BLOG?

Interaction and concision are two key words for online education. Asking questions and/or inviting to participate in a discussion are effective

⁴ <http://www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Blog> (date of access 20.08.2012).

strategies to keep in touch with learners. Which features characterize the most popular teacher-blogs? What makes them so popular among learners? What do students learn on blogs? Which competences do they develop? An analysis of a few examples will provide the answers to these questions.

The variety of content on Drummer's blog⁵ may account for its popularity. The most important feature of her blog is her interaction with readers. She organizes competitions and encourages students to learn more about a language or a selected country. For example, students can win a lesson with a native speaker, if they give the answer to the question which river is the longest in Germany and which three big cities it passes through.

Furthermore, in the comments, she publishes explanations of her learners on the subject of German:

Agnieszka, I will try to explain somehow this German word "it's necessary" / "one should". And now following Agnieszka's examples:

1. Eine neue Waschmaschine muss gekauft werden – Trzeba kupić nową pralkę [bo na przykład zostało to zapisane w umowie (...)]. A new washing machine has to be bought [because it has been included in an agreement, for example (...)] (transl. G.G.S.).
2. Eine neue Waschmaschine müsste gekauft werden – Trzeba kupić nową pralkę (skoro stara się zepsuła, to zapewne musimy kupić nową). A new washing machine needs to be bought (as the old one is broken, we must buy a new one) (transl. G.G.S.).
3. Eine neue Waschmaschine soll gekauft werden – Trzeba kupić nową pralkę (bo tak uważam ja lub stara mi się nie podoba). A new washing machine should be bought (this is my opinion, or I don't like the old one) (transl. G.G.S.).
4. Eine neue Waschmaschine sollte gekauft werden – Trzeba kupić nową pralkę (radzi pan Wiesio, który zobaczył naszą pralkę po awarii). A new washing machine should be bought (according to Mr Wiesio who looked a tour old one after it broke) (Aleksandra)⁶ (transl. G.G.S.).

As a result, students are engaged in the process of foreign language teaching. Drummer also gave her students the possibility not only of co-

⁵ Agnieszka Drummer is a German teacher and translator working and living in Germany. She is also an author of two coursebooks for learning German entitled "Pokochaj niemiecki" and "Niemiecki dla Ciebie". She not only runs a blog "Agnieszka Drummer – język niemiecki", but also a Fan Page on Facebook with 211 000 fans (which was awarded the title "Top 25 Language Fan Pages 2011 and 1 Language Fan Pages 2012) and her website kursyniemieckiego.de. Drummer communicates with her learners on Twitter as well. She gives lectures on the Internet (so called webinars) on issues relating to learning German. See her blog under: <http://agnieszkadrummer.wordpress.com/> (date of access 1.09.2012) and her fanpage: Blog o języku niemieckim, <http://blog.tyczkowski.com/> (date of access: 18.10.2013).

⁶ <http://agnieszkadrummer.wordpress.com/2013/10/01/jak-jest-po-niemiecku-trzeba/> (date of access 20.11.2013).

creating the content of particular posts but also her online coursebook. Her idea to write a coursebook with a daily program met with interest. The participants in a two-year-long project gave her feedback on how they evaluated each lesson in terms of clarity and intelligibility. Interaction with students enabled her to revise some improvements. The students, in turn, experienced how to learn on a regular basis using a method of small steps:

(...) Being completely honest I can recommend you the way of learning prepared by Agnieszka! Learning in this way is extremely easy (short lessons, small parts of material at once), pleasurable (you see the results very fast) (...) (Dorota)⁷ (transl. G.G.S.).

Intercultural competence can be developed by learners in her blog as well, because there are interesting facts about German culture, customs and daily life. Drummer published, for instance, a short text about summer holidays and underlined that vacation dates in Germany vary with each federal state⁸.

Language awareness being an important aspect of intercultural competence is another important ability students can develop reading Drummer's blog. She gives examples how some Polish words can be translated into German, giving equivalents and showing that they are in some cases not 1:1 (the word "trzeba" can be translated in different ways depending on the context: "es ist notwendig", "es muss gemacht werden", "es ist nötig" etc.). The following comments of readers confirm that they develop their language awareness by reading explanations as mentioned above: "I've just realized, that there is no single equivalent of this word (...)." (tenshi, transl. G.G.S.) or "A very interesting post! German people seem to be more precise describing 'the duties'" (Aleksandra, transl. G.G.S.)⁹. Grammar phenomena, such as adjective declination or word order in German, is rarely explained by Drummer on her blog.

Another example of a language learning blog having the potential to develop students language skills, communicative and intercultural competences is by Tyczkowski¹⁰. There are some analogies between Drummer's

⁷ <http://agnieszkadrummer.wordpress.com/2012/06/07/kroliki-czyli-metoda-ad-czyli-www-kursyniemieckiego-de/> (date of access 21.11.2013).

⁸ <http://agnieszkadrummer.wordpress.com/2012/07/07/sommerferien/> (date of access 26.11.2013).

⁹ <http://agnieszkadrummer.wordpress.com/2013/10/01/jak-jest-po-niemiecku-trzeba/> (date of access 20.11.2013).

¹⁰ Tyczkowski is a lecturer passionate about teaching German. His blog is linked to his fan page on Facebook (6.770 fans), Twitter, Youtube, Grin and Google Plus. Tyczkowski is therefore active as a teacher not only on his blog, but also in other social media. See his blog under: Blog o języku niemieckim, <http://blog.tyczkowski.com/> (date of access: 18.10.2013)

and Tyczkowski's blogs. Both promote autonomous learning by explaining how to learn German at home outside the classroom, and motivate by showing their own motivation and passion for foreign languages.

In comparison to Drummer, Tyczkowski posts more short texts (in audio versions as well) with comments on vocabulary and grammar structures. What makes his site student-friendly, are the interactive exercises adapted to each language level, from A1 to C2, including crosswords, picture descriptions, gap fills, audio and audio-visual texts to test listening and comprehension, just to name a few. Thus students have many possibilities to develop their language competence, above all listening, reading and vocabulary.

Content personalization on his blog can be influenced by readers. Students are asked to fill in opinion polls for example on subjects they are interested in (when it comes to learning German) and to leave comments on the content. Co-creating the content, they partially take responsibility for their learning process, which influences their autonomy. It can also be motivating for them to learn languages using blogs, because they find texts that are interesting for them there.

For the purposes of this article I would like to focus on one more blog which differs from those presented, and is run by an English teacher from Germany. Donath¹¹ created his blog more to organize the learning environment for the students he teaches in secondary school than to post for a large group of readers. The author is a guide, who introduces his students to writing on the Internet and consequently develop their media competence. He puts in his blog all the information about his classes, tasks, homework, guidelines, and links to important articles and materials. On his site students find instructions on how to podcast, write essays and write their own blogs.

Concluding, all the blogs discussed above are dedicated to students interested in foreign language learning. They are written by motivated teachers who above all foster student autonomy through organizing the learning environment, giving advice on language learning and being moderators of the learning process.

The fact which makes the description of blogs challenging is that they differ in form and content, as well as in their emphasis on the linguistic, communicative and intercultural competences being developed by students. However, all of them have one function in common: they serve as motivational tools for learning foreign languages.

and his fanpage: Niemiecki online, <http://www.facebook.com/niemiecki.online> (date of access: 18.10.2013).

¹¹ See <http://donathsf.wordpress.com/> (date of access 2.08.2012).

6. CONCLUSIONS

1. There are different kinds of teacher-blogs; they are created to motivate students to learn foreign languages, to promote the teacher or to organize the learning environment of a defined group etc. The variety of functions they can possess makes the classification of teacher-blogs very difficult. For didactic purposes, it is important to concentrate on their value in the language learning context, pointing out their functions, such as: motivating, organizing, fostering autonomous learning, developing language, communicative and intercultural competences, promoting language awareness and ordering knowledge of language, just to name a few.

2. Edu-blogs are teaching and learning platforms where teachers (as language advisors) and students can exchange their ideas and experiences referring to different aspects of language learning.

3. Blogs offer many opportunities for learning foreign languages in an integrated way, by listening, writing and reading.

4. In blogs, no time and place limits exist. Learning and teaching can take place whenever and wherever, as long as the user has access to the Internet. This can in turn influence the development of student autonomy, understood as the ability to take responsibility for the learning process, including organizing and planning it.

5. One of the most important features of a blog is its interactive character. This means that learners are co-authors, which, in turn, makes them engaged in the process of learning, and consequently more motivated. Interactivity refers to the exercises as well. The possibility of getting answers to questions, or feedback after doing an exercise, is a sign of the interactive character of teacher-blogs.

6. On the one hand, teaching and learning using blogs makes the educational process more informal, as far as communication is concerned, and for this reason, students can be more active than in traditional classes. On the other hand, it is difficult to organize the learning process and follow students' progress, because of the significant heterogeneity of blog-viewers. This is an obstacle, because, as Dakowska (2012) observes, "all the principles and criteria of teaching must be adjusted to the addressee, i.e. the language learner, his or her age and proficiency level as well as interests and needs" (Dakowska 2012: 192). Blogs should be, hence, treated as an additional source of knowledge where students can find some interesting facts, share their experiences or dispel doubts about language itself or learning strategies.

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