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Research Article

On the use of blogging in the classroom of English for Specific Purposes in times of COVID-19 to promote written skills: a collaborative approach

Ana Ibanez[1]

1. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Spain

This study presents the results of a blogging project that was carried out in a course in English for Tourism during the lockdown in Spain in March-May 2020. This course, aimed at students who already possess a B1 level (according to the CEFRL, 2001, 2018), intends to help them reach a B2 level. The course is normally based on blended learning. However, given the fact that students could not attend the face-to-face follow-up sessions, blogging was used as an extra activity, so that they could practice their written skills online. The project consisted of the following: students were invited to write an entry for the course blog, created with the tool Blogger. They also had to comment on each other's posts, and there was a phase of peer review. Results show that the rate of success among the students who took part in this project was significantly higher than those who did not.

1. Introduction

The use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in the foreign language classroom has been widely addressed in the last two decades. However, the demand for digital tools has grown exponentially due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, which made practically the whole world lock at home. This paper is thus framed within the use of digital technologies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

This research emerged out of the need to attend to the emerging and growing demands of English for Tourism students to practice their written English production at home. More specifically, it presents the results of a blogging project that was carried out in the course *Inglés II para Turismo* (English for

Tourism II), as for of the Degree in Tourism, during the lockdown in Spain in March, April and May 2020, in UNED, a blending learning university. This course, aimed at students who already possess a B1 level (according to the CEFRL, 2001, 2018), intends to help them reach a B2 level. In the academic year 2019-2020, it coincided almost completely with the period of full lockdown that Spain had to go through due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That semester, the course had to be delivered fully online. As a consequence, blogging was offered as an extra activity so that they could practice their writing skills with a social component. Thus, the aim here is to see if this extra activity had a positive impact on their achievement.

This paper is organized as follows: After describing the relevant literature on blogging in the classroom, I outline the methodological aspects of this work. After this, the results section provides the data obtained, and finally, and in the last section the conclusions obtained are presented, together with the limitations of this piece of research.

2. State of the art: blogging in the language classroom

According to many studies, the use of ICTs in the teaching and learning of languages causes more student interaction, and more collaborative work and teamwork (Kukulska-Hulme, 2005; Maina et al., 2017), and provides students with very beneficial experiences. Blogs are certainly one of these ICT tools. They have been defined by Ward (2004: 2) as "a website that is updated regularly and organized chronologically according to the date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards." Something important about blogs for our purposes here is that they are usually aimed at self-expression, as Ward (2004) suggests. In this sense, for Quintero (2008) blogs give students the chance to express their inner voices with their own style. This informal aspect of blogs is indeed an efficient resource to let students express themselves more naturally, as suggested by the communicative approach to language teaching and learning and, more recently, by the action-oriented approach. The use of blogging in the language classroom has been widely studied. Hewett (2000) and Pelletieri (2000) focus on its benefits for grammar skills. This is supported by Castañeda's (2011) findings. Witte (2007) shows how blogs can help students develop digital literacy as well as traditional literacy skills, and Carney (2007) focuses on motivation as a key aspect. Arena (2008) supports this idea and additionally reports major benefits in lexical competencies. Another potential of blogging is its interactivity, thanks to the commenting option (Murray et al., 2007). De Almeida Soares (2008) focuses on students' perceptions of blogging and shows that students themselves perceive blogs as

useful learning tools. Elola and Oskoz (2008) report on a blogging project, which used blogs as resources to enhance intercultural competencies. Murray and Hourigan (2008) and Martín Monje (2011) focus on blogs for specific purposes. More recently, the benefits of blogging in the EFL classroom have also been reported by Said (2016), Muhtia & Drajati (2017) Montaner-Villalba (2020), etc., but up until now the usefulness of this resource in exclusively online courses has not been studied in depth. The novelty of the present study lies in the context in which blogging was applied, which is the lockdown period due to the global pandemic of 2020.

3. Method

This section describes the research methodology that was followed to obtain the data for analysis which is needed to respond to the two research questions of this study, namely: (1) Does blogging promote writing skills for *online* students of ESP? and (2) Does blogging motivate *online* students of ESP? In order to answer these questions a quasi-experimental study was carried out. In what follows, details on this type of study, the participants in such study, the data collection instruments used and the procedures followed to obtain the data are exhaustively described.

3.1. Type of study

The design of this piece of research is quasi-experimental, given that the control and the experimental groups were not randomly assigned. Instead, the subjects under the study of the experimental group (EG) were the ones who voluntarily participated in the blogging project. Therefore, the criterion for their selection is their willingness to participate. Likewise, the subjects selected for the control group (CG) are an equivalent selection of students who did not participate in such a project. The independent variable under study was the blogging activity, and the dependent variable was the final results. It was therefore a non-equivalent group design, with a potential confounding variable or factor: attitude towards the course and willingness to work extra, given that in order to volunteer for more practice you need to be motivated. Thus, in order to assure the internal validity of the study, the sample of subjects in the CG was restricted to those who did not participate in the blogging project, but who had an equal active participation in the other tasks, and in the forums as the EG, which can be considered to be related to similar attitudinal factors. Even more, there was another optional task in this course, an oral one, and the subjects of the CG were selected among those who did such a task. In this way, by selecting a comparison group that matches with the treatment

group, the members in both groups had the same values of potential confounders, but different independent variable values.

3.2. Participants

The sample for this study consists of 70 students of the course *English II for Tourism* of the Degree in Tourism of UNED university. This course enables them to reach a B2 level, according to the CEFRL (2018: 60). The students were divided into two similar groups: the control group (CG), composed of 35 students who did not participate in the blogging project but who had an active participation in the other course tasks, and, especially, who also participated in another optional task: an oral task, which was graded but did not count for the final mark; and the experimental group (EG), composed of the 35 students who volunteered for the blogging activity. The total number of students enrolled in the course was 291. Thus, for the non-probability sampling procedure convenience sampling was used, since participants were selected based on willingness to take part.

3.3. Data-collection instruments and procedures

The instruments used to collect the data were four: (1) participant's activity in the forum and in the blog (2) a writing task for the blog, (3) the final exam to evaluate their final achievement, and (4) a mixed-type post questionnaire, which was delivered among the subjects in the experimental group and which aimed at evaluating their rating of the blogging activities and their own learning. As for (1) and (2), participants' activity consisted of writing one post for the blog, and of commenting on others' posts (both in the forum and in the blog) at least once. The posts had to include visual content to support their texts (images or video). Given that students had to prepare their texts at home, the task did not include any time control. They were suggested to write a post of around 300-600 words. The task lasted two weeks. Their writings and comments were analyzed holistically by the teacher researcher, who noted down all the errors she found, and by their peers. An error analysis approach was promoted by the teacher researcher by sending the revised texts with a track of the revisions made and some suggestions for improvement. In this way, students could see their errors and shortcomings and comment on them, as well as solve any doubts they may have. In the second phase, students wrote their texts again. This second version was uploaded to the blog by the teacher-researchers. Once the post was published, the link to it was shared in the forum so that other students could add their comments on the blog. In this process, then, other students behaved as reviewers (before the post was

published) and as commenters (once the post was published). Therefore, the participants' data were analyzed in terms of their contribution to the tasks.

As for (3), the final exam consisted of a multiple-choice test with 32 grammar and vocabulary questions, as well as a reading comprehension test. The test was 80% of the final mark. Besides this, students had to write a text of around 180 words describing a promotional video of Ireland, behaving as audio narrators. They had to select accurate expressions to highlight what most interesting aspects of this clip would be for a blind tourist. This written task was based loosely on audio description techniques, given that the teacher researcher has wide experience in applying this mode of accessible audio-visual translation technique to the foreign language classroom.

With regards to (4), the postquestionnaire was very brief, and it was validated by previous case studies (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen 2017, Ibáñez Moreno & Escobar 2018), where the same questions, with slight variations because of the differences in the projects, were included. It included 10 closed 5-point Likert scale questions –where 1 meant *not at all* and 5 meant *I am very happy with the activity* or *I totally agree*– and one final optional open question where the participants could add any comments they wanted to make. It was delivered among the students who volunteered to participate in the blogging task, that is, the EG, in order to analyse their degree of satisfaction with it and also their awareness of their own learning process. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Section A wanted to see how the participants assessed their own progress as regards written skills, Section B wanted to see how they evaluated their collaborative experience, Section C wanted to obtain information about the blog as a tool in the task-based classroom, and, finally, Section D was left open for non-directed comments, in order to obtain honest opinions on the overall experience.

4. Results

As for point (1), participation in the forum, 135 messages were sent to the *Blog of the course* thread, where the project was proposed. Participation in the forums raised in general, as shown in table 1 below, where a general account of the number of messages can be seen in comparison with the previous academic year, 2018-2019:

	General	Students	*Units 1–5*	*Units 6–11*	Total
2019	168	1	12	14	195
2020	438	5	9	8	460

Table 1. Participation in the forum (in 2020 and 2019)

As can be observed, participation in 2020 was almost four times higher than in the year before. In any case, what can be seen in 2020 is that participation in the two forums related to the blogging activity was much higher as compared to the other conversation threads in the forums. As for point (2), in order to promote their motivation to work on this task in a natural way they were informed several times of the visits their posts had had. In this sense, the most visited post, and which received more comments, was *New York and Dating: a real-life story and how to take advantage of the opportunities while you are traveling*, with 357 visits by the end of the project. Another part of the task was to revise each others' posts in the forum, and to comment on them in the blog itself, in order to work on interaction skills and natural language use. In this case, students preferred to comment on the posts in the blog itself, and they used the forum to peer-review each other.

With regards to point (3), the final exam, it is used here as a measurable post-task which can give an indication of the students' actual improvement thanks to the blogging activities. In this sense, given that the only difference between the CG and the EG is their participation in the blog, the results presented below show that the blog may have contributed to higher student achievement in their writing skills. Table 2 below shows the media of the marks obtained by the experimental and the control group, both in June and in September. Additionally, the third column indicates the number of students who finally did not take the exam, and consequently did not pass the course:

	June (media)	September (media)	Drop-out rate
CG	6,83	5,85	3
EG	7,56	4	0

Table 2. Results of the final exams

In light of these data, we can say that a connection may exist between the students' participation in the blogging activity and their final results in the exams.

Finally, as for (4), data obtained from a post-questionnaire, this area of analysis consisted of a mixed-type questionnaire, with both closed and open questions. Given that this part of the project was optional, it must be taken into account that only 13 students filled in the post-questionnaire. The results, though, outreached the author's expectations. All the students indicated that they were satisfied with how they practiced their writing in English for tourism, and the great majority (almost 80%) indicated that they were highly satisfied. The same can be said of responses to question 9, where nine students responded that they were totally satisfied with this idea and four that they were satisfied. Additionally, all the students declared to have been motivated thanks to the blogging activity in their practice of writing in English. Only two questions obtained one response on a scale of 3: questions 4 and 7. Overall, we can state that the 13 participants that completed the questionnaire were satisfied with the blogging task and with their performance in it. As for the open question, students pointed at the fact that the activity was interesting, motivating and useful. It was also considered a fun experience. These comments show that the respondents were motivated and satisfied with the task because they felt it was interesting, that feeling involved was a great experience and also felt supported by the teacher.

5. Conclusions

We can suggest that blogging is a motivating activity that contributes to promoting written skills (especially production skills) in the learning of ESP in an online environment. In this sense, this study expands the work made by Martín Monje (2011) by supporting the hypothesis that blogging is a very useful and successful resource to enhance collaborative written production in EFL in online settings,

and, to motivate students (as in Carney, 2007). In the context in which it took place, in which all had to be done online and face-to-face relationships in general had to be shut down, this tool seemed to be a very interesting support for students to work collaboratively and to not feel alone in their learning process. Thus, it was a good resource to help students in a difficult context where face-to-face lessons had to be cancelled, not only because of writing the post itself but because of the interaction in the forum and in the blog with other students, which also proves that collaborative approaches (as in Talaván et al., 2017) in online settings give good results. This study has, nonetheless, limitations: first, the post-questionnaire was only answered by 13 students. This is a low percentage representing the students, and therefore the results are not generalizable to the rest of the students. Second, as for the procedures, the duration of the task was very brief, and students could only send one post per person. Even if they later had the opportunity to comment on the peers' posts, we can consider this experiment as a pilot study that could be replicated with a more in-depth one within the context of a longer project, which will be carried out soon in order to assess the validity of the results presented here.

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Declarations