

Research in weblog pedagogy: Blogging and developing learner autonomy in a JFL context

Keywords

weblog, blogging, learner autonomy, collaboration, foreign language teaching

Technology has provided teachers with additional environments for language teaching. A recent trend is the application of weblogs to teaching practice. This technology enables teachers to ask how weblogs, which have been primarily used for personal purposes, can be applied to teaching, especially language teaching. This paper reports on a case study using weblogs throughout a semester in a language course in a Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) context in the United States. The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the application of weblogs and learner autonomy. To achieve this, the effectiveness of weblogs in developing learner autonomy and the success of collaboration in an online community were investigated.

近年、言語教育の場でウェブログ（以下、ブログと略）の活用が注目されている。しかしながら、主として個人的な目的で利用されているブログの性質を考えると、はたして言語教育の場においてどこまで活用できるのか、その点については議論の余地がある。本稿の目的は、ブログと学習者の自律心育成の相関関係を明らかにすることにある。具体的には、アメリカの大学において、言語教育の一環でブログを導入した日本語クラス（JFL）の実態を追うことで、学習者の自律心育成にブログがどのような影響を与えるのか、さらにはインターネット上でのコミュニティーにおいて学習者間の共同作業がどのように機能していくのかについて議論していく。本稿は、実例を通じて、外国語教育においてブログがプラスの役割を果たし、言語教育において大きな可能性を秘めていることを示唆するものである。

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MANY students are motivated to learn a foreign language but do not know how to develop language proficiency. Teacher-centered pedagogy and limited chances to use the target language (TL) complicate the situation. Often textbooks are the primary mediator between students and the TL in and out of class, and this limitation restricts students' communicative competence. A potential solution to these difficulties is learner autonomy. Autonomous learning refers to students who can use learning strategies for their own goals and willingly take responsibility for their language learning (Wenden, 1991).

One way to develop students accustomed to autonomous learning is through technology. Weblogs, where people post their ideas and receive comments from other users via the Internet (Wang & Fang, 2006), have provided new possibilities in foreign language teaching, and using the technology offers an alternative way to potentially foster self-directed students. Writing weblogs can motivate students to read, write, and conduct research (Oravec, 2003).

This paper explores possibilities for using weblogs in teaching a foreign language, and offers suggestions for how teachers can incorporate the technology into their classroom.

Learner autonomy and collaboration

Learner autonomy was first identified as "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Since then, other researchers have developed their own definitions reflecting a new perspective: Autonomy can be fostered through social components (e.g., Holliday, 2005; Lee, 1998). Here, autonomy does not refer to teacher independence, but teacher-learner interdependence. Social significance is key to developing learner autonomy (Little, 1996). Holliday (2005) used the term *social autonomy* to argue the significance of language learners being constantly critical and aware of the social influences and implications of their learning. Benson (2001) also argued that learner autonomy should be incorporated with social and cooperative learning. In short, autonomous language learning does not mean learning by oneself. Interaction and collaboration assist learners to develop their language skills leading to greater autonomy.

Lee (1998) reported on a self-directed learning program in a Taiwanese university and revealed that self-directed learning promoted independence in learners being able to take increasing responsibility for their learning, but collaboration was a crucial factor to promote learner autonomy. More specifically, collaboration with the instructor (e.g., teacher counseling) or with peers (e.g., collaborative learning) was effective for helping students to become more self-directed. It is important to note that promoting autonomy did not mean reducing teacher initiative. Rather, providing the necessary supportive circumstances was the key to developing student capacity and willingness to become responsible for their own learning. Moreover, Cotterall (1995) reported on a case study of developing course strategies for learner autonomy in an EAP course at a language institute in New Zealand, emphasizing the importance of learners talking about learning. More specifically, engaging in dialog about the learning process between learners and the teacher was essential to foster learner autonomy. In this way, teacher support was crucial to encouraging students to be self-directed.

Collaborative learning in weblog pedagogy

Collaboration in weblog pedagogy has certain implications. In terms of developing social skills, collaborative learning helps students learn how to efficiently work with peers through communication and conflict management. Peer interaction expedites learning (Wang & Fang, 2006). From a different view, untalkative students may feel more comfortable engaging in learning via weblogs. Since their interaction is online, they do not have to communicate face-to-face. More importantly, collaboration via weblogs provides students with opportunities to self-regulate their learning (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006).

Baggetun and Wasson (2006) reported on the applicability of weblogs to help learning in terms of self-regulated learning (SRL) by illustrating various aspects of students' blogging and their relation to SRL. The first finding was that blogging supported SRL in various ways as it provided (a) a means for reflecting on a topic, (b) a way to invite and initiate conversations with other students, and (c) a tool to build personal knowledge by linking with others' comments or relevant learning resources. The other finding was that SRL via weblogs was not limited to the individual. The technology made students aware of their metacognitive knowledge and provided them with insight into what others were thinking about and what issues they struggled with. This aspect of weblogs provided a powerful tool for

“collectively developing a conceptual understanding of a topic” (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006, p. 469).

Studies on collaboration through weblogs in language teaching have been increasing. Wang and Fang (2006) reported on a rhetoric and writing class at a Taiwanese university. In the study, weblogs were used to facilitate the skills for users to articulate their own learning, reflecting on it, and engaging in discourse with other learners. The findings were that collaboration via weblogs was useful for encouraging positive interdependence among learners in groups to accomplish shared goals, and that online communication promoted autonomous learning among the students.

In addition, Jones (2006) described one use of a weblog in an ESL writing class. The study determined that the application of a weblog positively affected the development of students' writing skills and more specifically reading peer comments allowed students to develop their ability to criticize each other's writing. In this way, weblog-based pedagogy has provided a new environment in language teaching and has positively affected language learning.

The focus of the current study is to examine the relationship between the application of weblogs and learner autonomy in a JFL context in the United States. Specifically, two questions will be addressed:

1. How well does collaborative learning work, including collaboration between an instructor and students, and collaboration among students?
2. How does the use of weblogs encourage students to be more self-directed?

Method

Weblogs were used in a JFL course offered at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. As stated in the course syllabus, students were required to (a) post journal entries to their weblog every week (some students kept diaries of what they had done in a week or what they were going to do in summer vacation while others wrote new Japanese expressions or new grammar structures which they studied through their Japanese conversation partners or on Japanese-learning websites), (b) visit peer weblogs and read the entries, and (c) outside of the classroom leave comments for other students in their assigned groups. The purpose of using weblogs, therefore, was for students to become more self-directed and to increase social interaction using Japanese.

At the beginning of the semester, weblogs were created by employing a free online service <http://wordpress.com>. The instructor also created his own weblog <http://iidaatsushi.wordpress.com/> to share general information, and every student's weblog was

linked there. As a result, both the instructor and students could go back and forth between the weblogs.

Participants

Participants were ten students (nine US Americans and one Korean) who had at least one and a half years of Japanese learning experience before taking the course. None had studied in Japan.

Data collection

Data were collected twice: at the midterm and end of the semester. The first data consisted of student oral and written responses in teacher-student conferencing and in a self-reflection form (see Appendix A). Conversations during conferencing were not audio recorded because conferences were held during class and the main purpose of conferencing was to give students advice and suggestions to better achieve their personal goals through the activity. The second data collection was conducted with 12 questions using a five-point Likert scale (see Appendix B).

Data analysis

Participant responses were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. The participant responses to Likert scale questions were on a scale of 1 to 5 (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: not sure, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree), which allowed computation of mean values and standard deviations. Participant reflections of their learning were analyzed qualitatively to examine how weblog-based independent learning had

worked to develop the students' Japanese proficiencies and what kinds of problems they encountered.

Results

Quantitative approach: Questionnaire

Tables 1 and 2 indicate the results of the questionnaire. All questions scored more than 3.2 out of 5 points in mean values, suggesting the respondents were positively disposed towards using weblogs.

Table 1 shows participant perspectives of the application of weblogs to their individual learning. In terms of self-directed language learning, a weblog-based journal seems to help participants achieve personal goals ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.03$), and the students feel it is an effective way to improve language skills ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.15$). More significantly, it encourages students to be autonomous ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.10$). In this way, a weblog-based journal may have positively influenced learning.

Table 2 demonstrates the participant perspectives of collaboration through weblogs. Participants saw collaboration as necessary for improving their Japanese skills ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.63$). Almost all the participants considered the instructor's feedback helpful for learning ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.63$). By contrast, half of the participants did not agree that their classmates' comments were beneficial to raising language awareness. This indicates some students felt peer comments were useful but others did not. Additionally, many participants were not sure whether their comments to peers were useful in raising language awareness ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.16$). In summation, the

Table 1. Participant perspectives on weblog-based individual learning (n=10)

Question items	Mean	Std deviation
1-1. Keeping journals using weblogs is useful for improving my Japanese skills.	4.0	1.15
1-2. Weblog-based journal can allow me to become a self-directed learner.	3.9	1.10
1-3. Weblog-based journal entries help me achieve my individual goals.	3.8	1.03

Table 2. Participants' perspectives of collaboration through weblogs (n=10)

Question items	Mean	Std deviation
2-1. Reading peers' weblogs is beneficial to develop Japanese skills.	3.8	1.14
2-2. Instructor's comments on my journal are helpful for my Japanese learning.	4.3	0.63
2-3. Peers' comments are beneficial to raising language awareness.	3.2	1.48
2-4. My comments are beneficial to make my peers raise language awareness.	3.2	1.16
2-5. Collaboration is necessary in developing my Japanese skills.	4.3	0.63

data indicate participants realized the necessity of collaboration in learning, but they were not sure exactly what approaches were effective.

Qualitative approach: Self-reflection and interview

Participants' self-reflection forms provided information on how well collaborative learning worked. Participants had both positive and negative comments regarding peer responses. Positive comments included:

- Mistakes can be seen and opinions can be shared.
- I can find out lots of interesting sources and examples in my classmates' weblogs.

Negative comments included:

- If peers' entries don't have anything interesting to share, it's hard to comment on their entries.
- It rarely gives me enough motivation to react to responses.
- I don't get anything out of writing and reading peer comments.
- People don't seem to respond very often.

These quotations show using weblogs provided participants with opportunities to work collaboratively, but did not necessarily motivate them to give peer feedback.

Discussion

One interesting finding from this study is that, as previous studies have reported (e.g., Cotterall, 1995; Lee, 1998), collaboration is an important factor to foster learner autonomy. Nine out of 10 participants emphasized the significance of peer response to develop their Japanese skills. However, collaboration with the instructor was more important than with peers. Participants were inclined to consider instructor feedback crucial to learning the correct forms of the language as well as to understanding how their entries made sense in terms of pragmatics. The instructor's feedback consisted of pointing out grammatical mistakes, and giving students correct forms and other possible usages, and leaving questions relevant to their entries in order to maintain an online conversation with students. Participants said the interaction with the instructor was the best way to access authentic Japanese, so they regarded instructor comments as meaningful to learning. This is similar to a finding in Cotterall's (1995) study that collaboration between instructor and students is essential for promoting learner autonomy. Autonomy, therefore, does not refer to independence from teachers (Lee, 1998). Rather, teacher feedback and support are necessary to promote autonomous learning.

In contrast, participants felt feedback from peers was not so useful to improve their language skills. First, participants did not know how to give feedback. Second, such comments as "I like your entry" or "Your entries are really useful" were not helpful. Third, few participants responded to peer weblogs from grammatical and pragmatic viewpoints.

Perhaps a successful approach for collaborative learning is to clarify the purpose of activities. In Wang and Fang's (2006) study, for instance, the goal of collaborative learning via weblogs was for each group to submit a research paper by discussing and developing ideas in the group. In short, a collaborative approach was used for a group project. In contrast, the primary purpose of individual learning in this Japanese class was for students to achieve personal goals, not to produce something through collaboration. That is perhaps why some participants did not value receiving and giving comments. As a previous study argued (Lee, 1998), collaboration is a prerequisite for fostering learner autonomy, but participants are not motivated to engage in peer response if doing so is difficult or not relevant to achieving goals. Regardless of whether participants gave and received comments on their weblogs, many emphasized the significance of collaboration (specifically, the importance of being a member of the online community).

The other finding in this study is that participants generally had positive attitudes towards weblog-based individual learning. Six out of ten were satisfied with this type of journal entry and they reported that using weblogs motivated them to study Japanese. In a teacher-student conference, they mentioned that weblog-based journals are better than paper journals for these reasons:

- Using weblogs allows participants to combine media with their Japanese learning.
- It enables them to read peer journals.
- It provides easier access to study Japanese (participants do not have to bring textbooks or dictionaries everyday; they can access web resources).

They believed these features of the technology develop their motivation to study Japanese outside class, and can allow them to become autonomous. Eight participants agreed that using weblogs allowed them to be self-directed learners, and nine stated that the application of weblogs was effective for improving their Japanese skills. In addition, eight said that weblog-based journal entries helped them achieve personal goals. These results indicate participants believe using weblogs is effective in this context, not simply because it provides additional opportunities to study the language, but because it encourages them to be autonomous.

Participants were able to develop an awareness of the nature of weblogs and realize the usefulness of the technology in their own learning. The following comment shows an individual's success in Japanese learning:

The blog is a great way for keeping a Japanese learning journal. I thoroughly enjoyed making the blog entries every week. I truly hope that we will continue to use blogs, as opposed to paper journals, in Japanese V. I also think the weblogs are much better way for others to see my progress and get tips in Japanese...

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to examine the relationship between the application of weblogs and the development of learner autonomy. The results of the study support that using weblogs positively affects student perceptions of language learning, and that the technology can be applicable to a JFL context.

Weblog-based individual learning can assist learners to become self-directed and help them develop their language skills. In terms of collaboration, reading peer weblogs in particular encouraged students to learn Japanese. In other words, the application of weblogs provides students with opportunities to reflect on their learning styles, which is essential to promoting autonomous learning. Additionally, collaboration between instructor and students helps students develop language proficiency. From this point of view, the nature of weblogs in educational settings is, as Fiedler (2003) described, "a reflective conversational tool for self-organized learning" (p. 1).

To better use weblogs for language teaching, further research needs to be conducted regarding how well collaboration among learners works. This study indicates that collaboration was an important approach to learning, but learners needed to know how to give peer feedback. From this viewpoint, learner training on how to give feedback may be necessary for successful collaboration. Thus perhaps language teachers should train students on how to provide feedback and what kinds of comments are helpful.

Weblogs open up new possibilities in language teaching and create additional spaces to teach language by going beyond the classroom context. This study describes just one approach in weblog pedagogy, but the technology can be a powerful way to foster learner autonomy.

Appendices

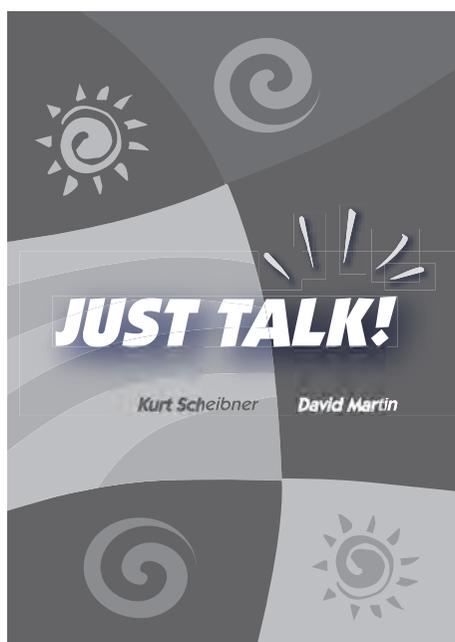
The appendices for this article can be downloaded from <jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2009/0902a.pdf>.

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