
Using Blogs to Practice Grammar Editing Skills

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Keywords: blogging, collaborative learning, learner autonomy, student-centred learning

Abstract

This paper reports on the pedagogic reasons for using blogs as a learning aid and how blogging was integrated into a curriculum at the National University of Singapore to support the learning of grammar editing skills of music students. To begin, the idea that blogging encourages learner autonomy by facilitating the practice and negotiation of meaning of ‘comprehensible output’ (Swain, 1995) is discussed. Next, the integration of blogging into the curriculum is considered and rationale given for the various pedagogic and administrative decisions that were made. Finally, the positive findings from a student attitudinal survey about blogging are discussed and a brief document analysis of the students’ blog posts in the course is given.

Introduction

Educators around the world have been using weblogs (known as blogs) to facilitate teaching and learning with university students for more than eight years. The benefits of using blogs as a platform to encourage learning and writing are well documented. [Davis](#) (2004) lists thirty potential uses for blogs in the classroom from the now standard reflective journal to having students post assignments based on literature readings and responding on their own blogs, creating a portfolio of their work. According to [Richardson](#) (2006), blogs can enhance critical thinking and increase learner autonomy. [Dieu](#) (2004, p. 26) notes that blogging gives students the chance to “maximize focused exposure to language in new situations, peer collaboration, and contact with experts.” Blog activities and assignments encourage student bloggers to communicate closely within their groups, thus practicing core soft skills such as problem solving and negotiation in their written communication.

At the start of the National University of Singapore (NUS) 2009/10 academic year, testing revealed that some of the students at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM)

had a reasonable understanding of basic grammar but many had difficulty applying their understanding to contextualized grammatical errors in longer texts such as their own or other students' paragraphs. The ability to self-correct grammatical errors in longer texts is essential for foreign students studying in English as this skill is necessary for them to progress to their next level of inter-language competence.

This paper briefly discusses why the blogging platform is a useful pedagogic tool and reports on how a blogging component was integrated into the YSTCM curriculum at NUS to enable students to practice grammar editing skills. It also presents and interprets findings from an attitudinal survey of a class of student bloggers about their learning experience using blogs and discusses these findings with a document analysis of the students' blog posts and comments made during the course.

Blogs and learner autonomy

Over the last twenty years the concept of learner autonomy has risen to prominence and modern pedagogy promotes the idea that learners should be more independent. To encourage learner autonomy students should have a role in planning, controlling and evaluating their own learning (Wenden, 1991). Blogging activities are a way of moving students away from teacher dependence towards independent learning. When used appropriately, they encourage learners to negotiate understanding and meaning about ideas and concepts through collaboration. In effect, students use each other as a learning resource and in the process begin to take charge of and take responsibility for their own learning.

Swain (1995) refers to this kind of practice with English-learning peers as 'comprehensible output.' She argues that this is nearly as important as comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003) because learning takes place when a student encounters a gap in their linguistic knowledge of the second language (L2). Swain believes that by noticing a gap between what they want to say and what they are able to say learners notice what they do not know or only know partially in a language. Then through hypothesizing and testing what could be lexically, grammatically or contextually possible, they might be able to modify their output so that they learn something new about the language. Consequently, learners reflect about the language they have learnt and their output enables them to make sense of and internalize linguistic knowledge.

Pedagogical blogging is a good way for learners of English to receive and produce comprehensible input and output because it incorporates many of the principles underlying cooperative learning. For example, student bloggers could be asked to watch a short film clip and critique its content in a blog post about it. They could also be instructed to comment on each others' posts regarding the film. This activity would involve both collaborative and interactive learning, two key elements of cooperative learning.

Integrating blogging into the course

YSTCM was founded in 2001 and is rapidly becoming a world-renowned music conservatory. The selection criteria for new students to the conservatory are related specifically to their musical ability. As a consequence, many of the students recruited from China, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam require supplementary English language courses to enable them to study and learn in English at university level. Most students are aged between 18 and 22 years old and 70% are from mainland China and fall between A2 and B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) for the four skills. The students can generally write simple connected sentences which are on familiar or personal topics and can produce spoken phrases sometimes connected in a simple way. Their listening and reading skills are a little stronger but overall they have a low level of English competence.

Classroom based action research was carried out on a class of 10 YSTCM students (9 Chinese, 1 Thai). As stated earlier, the students had a reasonable understanding of basic English grammar but many found it difficult applying their understanding to contextualized grammatical errors in their own texts. The challenge was how to use the blog platform to enable students to generate written comprehensible output and use this output to improve their grammar editing skills, whilst at the same time fostering cooperative learning and encouraging the students to be more independent in their learning outside the classroom.

To give students the opportunity to practice analyzing, synthesizing and presenting information using a modern writing platform, a blogging component was introduced to the course to generate contextualized extended texts. Students used blog posts to introduce themselves and their musical influences, review concerts, discuss composer's abilities and reflect on their learning. The majority of the homework on the course involved writing and commenting about blog posts.

The students were partnered with a blogging ‘buddy’ and given a blogging group of four to five students within the class. Blackstone, Spiri and Naganuma (2007) note that this is an effective way of guaranteeing that each member regularly receives comments on their posts and prevents ‘popular’ students from dominating blogging activity. Each student was required to comment on their blogging buddy’s posts and encouraged to comment on other members’ posts within the blogging group. Students were told that their posts should be in formal English. However, to encourage more ‘friendly’ feedback, their comments and suggestions to each other were allowed to be informal.

Also, each student was required to review his or her blog posts after in-class grammar awareness sessions (see below) and try and correct mistakes. For example, students were asked to focus on correcting article errors following article input sessions, pronoun errors following pronoun input sessions and so on. They were also asked to try and correct other mistakes related to the organization, structure and cohesion of the text and when possible comment on these problems in their blogging buddy’s posts. This kind of personalized and contextualized text editing practice was precisely what the students needed to improve.

To provide students with appropriate models of feedback and to show them that their blog contributions were being monitored the teacher posted comments about student posts and made blog entries as well. This was an essential pedagogic and administrative element as he was able to praise suitable student suggestions and prevent misunderstanding occurring with incorrect suggestions. The teacher’s participation also seemed to motivate the students to participate more because it demonstrated he was engaged in the blogging process with the students. Indeed one student blogger gently ‘reprimanded’ the teacher in a post when he did not post any comments one week. The student blogs can be viewed [here](#).

In-class blog editing



To further practice correcting contextualized grammatical errors in long texts, the music students were given the opportunity to edit their blogs in-class in a computer classroom. Blogging buddy pairs were instructed to review each other’s blog posts and consider their organization, cohesion and grammar. They were

asked to discuss any mistakes or problems and edit their posts where necessary and to post comments about some of the observations they were making. This was done to support the teacher's observations of the process in the evaluation of the activity. To encourage the students to be more independent in their learning when they asked the teacher questions, he opened the question up to the class and encouraged peer correction as much as possible. It was thought this would promote learner autonomy and enhanced learning outcomes by allowing students to negotiate meaning and understanding themselves and also provided good practice in the self correction skills that needed to be improved.

Grammar awareness

It was necessary to ensure that students received classroom input and practice of the kind of editing skills they would be required to reproduce on their blog posts for homework. Table 1 below shows how this was timetabled. The YSTCM course ran for 12 weeks with two-hour classes twice a week. Grammar awareness sessions were written into the curriculum and were taught in the two classes prior to the grammar editing homework. For example, in week three, the students reviewed the guidelines for the use of pronouns in class and were given opportunities to check their understanding of them in both discrete item and freer practice activities.

Table 1. "An example of the Lesson Plan for Week 3 of the YSTCM Course"

Week	Tutorial 1	Tutorial 2	Homework
3	Paragraph Writing (1) Grammar: Pronouns (1)	Presentation Skills (1) Grammar: Pronouns (2)	Tut 1: 2 nd Write blog post Tut 2: Comment on blogging partners' post and edit blogs for pronoun errors.

During the in-class grammar awareness sessions the music students demonstrated a good basic understanding of grammar and performed well with the discrete item practice. However, when they tried to find grammatical mistakes in the longer texts they started to question their understanding of grammar and began discussing the subject in more depth, asking each other what they thought was right and wrong and why. They also started to refer to the grammar guidelines that had been reviewed earlier in the class. This initial

guided practice was essential scaffolding for the homework, where they reviewed and edited their own blog posts for grammar errors.

Blog data and student feedback

To evaluate the effectiveness of using blogs to practice grammar editing skills the following methodology was used.

In order to monitor the correction process the initial blog posts were copied onto a document. Once student editing had taken place, it was possible to compare the initial post with the edited version. Next, each edited section was briefly looked at to determine if the student had improved the text in the editing process; whether, for example, students had successfully edited the tense, article and pronoun errors or whether they were still negotiating meaning about the grammatical forms they had written. It was thought that this activity would both provide an insight into the usefulness of the in-class grammar awareness sessions and evidence of the students' use of the blog platform to edit their texts and practice their grammar editing skills. A selection of these text comparisons is given in appendix 1.

In addition, the comments students posted to each other with grammar editing suggestions about their blog posts were also collated to determine if the learners gave each other useful suggestions and feedback about their English language skills. A selection of these comments and suggestions is presented in Appendix 2.

To gather and record student perceptions and beliefs about blogging and grammar editing on the course, the music students were asked to complete a survey at the end of the semester. The survey used a Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to assess student responses to 26 questions about writing in general, as well as blogging on the course. A summary of the survey findings is provided in Appendix 3.

Findings & Discussion

The students' perceptions of their learning and the use of blogs were very positive. 100% agreed blogging helped them find mistakes in their work. 100% also agreed that looking for grammar mistakes in their blogs made them think a lot more about grammar. 80% said they had learnt grammar from their classmates and 90% said they had helped correct their

classmates' English. Furthermore, 100% of students agreed that receiving feedback from a blogging partner was an effective way of improving their posts, 60% of which strongly agreed. This supports the idea that blogging is a student-centered, peer focused activity ([Glogoff, 2005](#)).

These figures are particularly encouraging when the educational background of the sample is considered. All the students had previously been taught English in a teacher centered-classroom using the grammar translation method. As [Wu \(2004\)](#) notes, culturally Chinese learners perceive their teachers to be an authoritative and domineering source of knowledge. Generally students are obedient and respectful and feel that they should learn from the teacher rather than from one another. The student feedback from the questionnaire indicates the YSTCM students altered these perceptions about learning. It also shows that students believe they learnt from each other and that blogging facilitated this student-centered learning. This positive feedback was supported by comments the students made to each other when blogging. 80% of students posted more than the required number of posts and comments and gave and received a lot of useful grammatical suggestions, such as, "I think you should change *chosen* to *choose*" as well as advice on content such as, "I think you need write [sic] something about how this piece makes you feel and not only introduce it". (More examples are given in Appendix 1.)



In previous semesters, trying to persuade students to practice grammar editing skills outside the classroom was very difficult. The music students are very busy with their core modules as well as the practicing and rehearsals they are involved with for live performances. The fact that most students posted more than the required number of posts indicates that they were highly engaged and found the activity useful. This is supported by student survey findings that show that 100% of students thought receiving feedback on written posts was positive and believed blogging was a good way to learn from other students.

Another benefit of this kind of written interaction was that students became more comfortable correcting one another verbally in class. For example, when the students worked on an essay using process writing, the learners in the class that had been doing the grammar editing using blogs were much more willing to give critical feedback to one another than the learners in classes who had not blog edited. This was because they had practiced giving and receiving feedback in their blog posts and were transferring these skills to the process writing activity in class.

Appendix 2 gives a selection of the type of student grammar editing completed on the course. It illustrates the kinds of errors that were corrected and provides some examples of attempted corrections. The in-class grammar awareness sessions proved to be extremely useful for the students as many of the corrections were related to the grammar topics discussed and practiced in-class. Furthermore, after analyzing the students first week's grammar editing it became apparent that they were identifying and correcting many more errors than the ones that they were asked to primarily focus on. For example, Appendix 2, comment 8 shows a student edit of the modal *must* to the modal *have*. This is a significant self-correction at this basic learner level and shows a real negotiation of meaning and understanding of modality took place. In addition, comment 9 is an edit of noun choice replacing *sound* with *melody*. This shows the students reflected on their word choice, realized they needed to be more specific and managed to select a more appropriate noun. It also suggests that the blogging activity encouraged learners to take charge of their own learning, becoming more autonomous in the process.

Another advantage of keeping a record of student's original posts and the edited versions was that it was possible to identify, for example, grammatical misunderstandings in the meaning and use of definite articles (see comment 2, appendix 2) and clarify understanding with the students individually during the course conferencing sessions.

Observations of the in-class blog editing were also very positive. The students were lively and engaged throughout the class and enjoyed reading, commenting and correcting each other's posts. It was noticeable that the students were immediately comfortable exchanging advice and suggestions with each other. One possible reason for this is that prior to the in-class blog editing session they had given each other written feedback about their work as part

of their blogging homework. This practiced written feedback gave them the confidence to voice their suggestions to their blogging buddy in class. As with the in-class process writing of the essay referred to earlier, the blogging activity enabled students to transfer skills honed on the blogging platform outside the classroom to face-to-face communication in the classroom.

Conclusion

This paper has provided pedagogic reasons for using blogs as a learning aid and detailed how blogging was integrated into a curriculum at the National University of Singapore to support the learning of grammar editing skills of music students. It has shown that blogging can encourage learner autonomy by facilitating the practice and the negotiation of meaning of 'comprehensible output'. It has also given rationale for the pedagogic choices made when integrating a blogging component into a curriculum. The positive findings from a student attitudinal survey about blogging have been discussed and a brief document analysis of the student's blog posts on the course has been given.

Using blogs to support student learning was very successful with the YSTCM class at NUS. The students improved their grammar editing skills, showed an increase in motivation and became more autonomous learners. Clearly, blogs can be a very useful and adaptable learning aid that can promote student centered learning. The challenge for educators is to determine how to appropriately integrate blogs into curricula to best meet their students' needs.

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Appendix 1 (student comments and suggestions)

- 1) I think that you want to use the word “join” but you write the other word “joy” down.
- 2) There are several problems in your essay: “What’s the music means to me” — should be “what does the music mean to me”? and “he just sing with his memory” — is it “he just sing by his memory”? And, when you want to show a YouTube clip, you can copy the “Embed” then type it.
- 3) It should be “talent” not “talente”. And — every moment with his should be “his every moment”. Also I think “the musicians must trusted in him” should be “the musicians trusted him”, “it not about how old is he” should be “it does not relate to his age”.
- 4) I found some mistakes in your work, you can correct them then your journal will be better. The first one is “Ye I know your guys “maybe it is “Ye I know you guys”. The second one is “can not” should better be “cannot” shorthand should better be corrected to normal typing. Such as “didn’t” should better be “did not”.
- 5) Maybe you can use “concern” instead of “consider” it has lots = there are lots difficulties informations = information
- 6) I think we can say the melody is very ordinary or it just has an ordinary melody rather than it is a ordinary melody.
- 7) However, I don’t understand what you mean by extremely well. I know the meaning of it. But I feel this adverb is too affirmative. Conductors are learning pieces as well. Every conductor has their own perspective to one piece. It is hard to define which one is more close to the composer’s will.
- 8) I found some mistake in your journal. 1st, I think you should change ‘CHOSEN’ to ‘CHOOSE’ 2nd, I think ‘change something from ‘ is better than ‘To’.

- 9) I think you also need write something about how this piece make you feel, not only introduce a piece.
- 10) I think you can write more specifically. Why it is a wrong era in 1970s? You can briefly introduce some of the information that you mentioned Suggestion: Trained strictly. No need “the” before “music”. He was only 18. In those years, he led his orchestra...By his age = because of his age. He was also appointedin 2009

Appendix 2 (student grammar editing)

Original post	Edited post	Successful edit	Still negotiating meaning
1) I have been study playing violin for 19 years.	I have <u>been playing</u> violin for 19 years.	✓	
2) When the children are over one full year old,	When <u>the</u> children are on <u>their one year old birthday</u>		✓
3) I began to learn the composition.	I began to <u>learn composition</u>	✓	
4) I realized it is such important that can easily influence my mood.	I realized <u>how easily it could</u> influence my mood.	✓	
5) he would warm up for half a hour.	he would warm up for half <u>an</u> hour	✓	
6) It seems that is all the memory it left.	It seems <u>like</u> that is all the memory <u>he</u> left.		✓
7) How come a man wear a high-heeled shoes	How can a man <u>wear high-heeled shoes</u>	✓	
8) I got new assignment, I must do it.	I got a new assignment, <u>that I have to do</u>	✓	
9) The sound is so smooth	The <u>melody</u> is so smooth	✓	
10) In my opinion, this world can united because of this kind of music.	In my opinion, <u>the</u> world can united by this kind of music.		✓

Appendix 3 (student survey)

No	Writing and blogging	(%) Strongly agree	(%) Agree	(%) Dis- agree
1	I like writing in general.	40	60	
2	I like it when my teacher gives comments on my writing.	80	20	
3	I like it when a classmate gives comments on my writing.	70	30	10
4	I like making comments on a classmate's writing.	30	40	30
5	I found grammar editing my essay in class useful.	80	10	10
6	I learnt English grammar from my classmates	40	40	20
7	I helped my classmates correct their English	30	60	10
8	I like blogging as an activity.	30	60	10
9	I blog in my free time in my first language.	10	60	30
10	I like posting writing assignments on my blog.	30	60	10
11	I like reading my classmates' written posts.	30	70	
12	I like my teacher making comments on my posts.	90	10	
13	Receiving feedback on my written posts is a positive experience.	70	30	
14	Blogging is a good way to learn from other students	60	40	
15	I would like to continue blogging.	60	40	

No	Blogging & Grammar	(%) Strongly agree	(%) Agree	(%) Dis- agree
1	Blogging on this course was a good way to communicate with classmates and the teacher.	60	40	
2	Blogging in this course has helped me improve my writing skills.	70	30	
3	Blogging on EM1201 helped me find grammar mistakes in my work.	70	30	
4	Looking for grammar mistakes on my blog and my	50	50	

	classmates blog really made me think more about grammar.			
5	Blogging has been a positive learning experience.	60	40	
6	I like having a blogging partner.	30	50	20
7	Receiving feedback from a blogging partner is effective for improving my post.	60	40	
8	Having a blogging partner encourages me to write better posts.	60	40	
9	Receiving feedback from a blogging partner is effective for improving my writing skills	40	60	
10	Receiving feedback from a blogging partner is a positive learning experience.	50	50	
11	Giving feedback on my blogging partners post is a positive learning experience.	50	50	

About the Author

Chris Harwood has taught EFL and EAP for over 15 years in Japan, Thailand, Austria, England, Egypt and now in Singapore. His research interests include learner autonomy, collaborative learning and CALL. He is currently researching how to integrate e-learning platforms into university English language departments. Chris lectures in Business Communication at the National University of Singapore.