



Blogs as protected spaces for language learners

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This paper discusses the idea of blogs as protected spaces for language learners. Gumbrecht (2004) suggested that blogging provides the writer with more control over the communication episode and is therefore the preferred mode of interaction for some people. This study investigates the suitability of this concept for language learning. The discussion is based on the experience of 15 language learners who used a blog for self-reflection and peer-to-peer interaction as part of a tertiary German language course. The experience of these learners shows that blogging can provide language learners with a personal space in which they feel safe to express themselves and to interact with other learners. Blogging can therefore have a positive effect on their willingness to communicate, which is one of the main objectives in second language education.

Keywords: language learning, blogging, willingness to communicate

Background

It has been suggested that people engage in blogging because it provides a “protected space” (Gumbrecht, 2004) for communication. As Herring *et al.* (2004) put it, blogs “allow authors to experience social interaction while giving them control over the communication space” (p. 11). Bloggers decide on the content of their blogs. The blog reader can only respond to the published post and, unlike in other forms of written online communication like chatting or instant messaging, the reader is unable to change the course of the conversation. The blogger leads the conversation whereas the blog reader only has the option of reacting, by choosing to comment or not to comment. The “asymmetrical communication rights” (Herring *et al.*, 2004, p. 10) between blogger and blog reader do not, however, diminish the role of the reader for the blogger. While bloggers are free to write about anything in their blogs, it has been shown that “bloggers imposed constraints on themselves” (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 2). A study by Nardi, Schirano, Gumbrecht and Swartz (2004) revealed that most bloggers are “acutely aware of their readers, even in confessional blogs, calibrating what they should and should not reveal” (p. 43). Blogging is therefore a social activity, and bloggers write with their audience - and their anticipated reactions - in mind. Yet, the limited interactivity provides, as Gumbrecht (2004) suggests, a “safety-net” or a “buffer” “from immediate social interaction” (p. 4).

The idea of blogs-as-protected-spaces is of interest for blogging in educational contexts (edublogging) and language learning (L2 blogging). Gumbrecht (2004) herself claims that “blogs created for educational purposes do not abide by the same rules as personal blogs” (p. 4). Educational blogs, she asserts, are not about self-expression but about developing writing skills. This is reflected in Deitering and Huston (2004) who describe blogs as a “virtual extension of the traditional classroom that encourages student-to-student interaction, provides a dynamic context for dialogue and feedback, and is particularly exciting in its potential for teaching with writing” (p. 273). Educational blogs have clearly a specific purpose as they reflect the teacher’s expectations and are not chosen by students over other media of communication. Some question for this reason the suitability of blogs for traditional teaching contexts (Downes, 2004; Lankshaer & Knobel, 2003; Richardson, 2006). Others believe that blogs can provide a learning space within existing pedagogical structures. Deitering and Huston (2004) support Oravec’s (2003) concept of learner blogs as a “middle space”, in which students are allowed to set their own styles and standards. They envisage blogs as a separate, student-owned space “within the framework established by the instructor in the classroom” (Deitering & Huston, 2004, p. 275). In the area of language learning, a similar idea has been expressed by Bloch (2007) who considers blogs to be a useful tool “for *creating a space* to discuss issues that may not be the focus of the traditional classroom” (p. 129, *italics added*).

Ducate and Lormicka's (2008) study shows some evidence that language learners conceive their learner blog as a protected space to write on issues they do not discuss in class. The authors suggest that the "blog offered a forum where students were comfortable expressing themselves more openly than in class, perhaps because they had more time to think about what they wanted to write and due to the personal nature of blogs" (p. 18). It is the aim of this paper to investigate the concept of blogs-as-protected-spaces in relation to language learner blogs (L2 blogs).

Method

29 students of an intermediate German language class kept public blogs for a period of one semester. They wrote weekly blog entries based on class-related topics (e.g. current affairs), online grammar exercises and individually chosen topics (e.g. podcasts). Students were encouraged to read and to comment on each other's blogs. The blogs were a learner-only domain. While the teacher appeared as a reader on the followers widget, she did not leave comments. Instead, students received a feedback sheet for each blog entry, assessing the coverage of all content areas and the level of interactivity. On student request, blog entries were corrected but no points were deducted for errors. This blog activity represented 30% of the final grade for the class.

Towards the end of the semester, all students were invited to participate in a study analysing their use of blogs and podcasts. 28 students took part in an online survey, managed by survey monkey, and 15 students agreed to join a focus group on the topic after the completion of the course. The students met in smaller groups of five to encourage participation and even contributions. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed participants to respond to and to elaborate on each other's comments. A research assistant recorded the interviews and took notes. The data from the three interviews was then transcribed for content. All sections relating to the participants' blogging experiences were identified and collated into one document. This document was then entered into a software for qualitative analysis, TAMS Analyzer, and coded. The codes evolved iteratively from concepts from the theoretical framework for this paper and concepts expressed by the participants. This analysis led to the classification of four categories, which will be discussed in the following section.

Results and discussion

A protected space

The survey covered a number of aspects on the effect of blogging on learning. For the purpose of this project the participants were asked if they could write about things in the blog that they could not say in class. The majority agreed with the statement as can be seen in Table 1, but as it turned out in the focus group interviews, for different reasons:

strongly disagree	disagree	partly disagree	partly agree	agree	strongly agree
0	2	5	7	10	4

Table 1: In the blog I could write about things which I could not say in class

As suggested by Ducate and Lormicka (2008), blogging provided students with more time "to find right words and language" and to think about what they had to say and to express their ideas accurately, as one student put it "to gather your thoughts and actually structure what you are going to say". They further explained that it allowed them to expand on their ideas. Others felt that their blogs were a more appropriate place to comment on class topics and on their learning, as this student who used her blog to "reflect about what you have done in class, whereas in class you are doing it".

The blogs were described as a space in which they could express their personal opinion. One student compared it to a diary where "you write how you are feeling about things, your own actual opinion". Some seized the opportunity to write honestly about their likes and dislikes of the class, as this student explained: "sometimes you'd like to say something about the class or something you don't like about the class and you can just put them out there. Anyone can say exactly how you felt about it which was good".

The aspect of limited interactivity, as described by Herring *et al.* (2004) might account for the willingness of these students to share their personal opinions, even if they contradicted other class members or the teacher. In the interview they explained, "you do not know whether people actually read your blogs, but

in class people really hear you". Similar to Gumbrecht's participants who preferred blogging over face-to-face conversations to avoid "immediate retribution" (p. 5), the students of this class felt protected from their classmates and their reactions. This aspect was addressed repeatedly, "you can get everything out, without anybody arguing against you", "you don't have people watching you or listening to you, don't have to fight so much with their reactions".

The perceived protection in the blog was contrasted with the classroom, in which students encountered "stage fright", and the fear of looking "like an idiot" in front of their peers. They were afraid of the "instant reactions of others" and disliked the "pressure when everyone is looking at you, you keep on talking and it doesn't make sense". Anxiety has been shown to be a contributing factor for a person's willingness to communicate (WTC) both in a first language (L1) and in a second language (L2) (Macintyre *et al.*, 1998). The provision of a space where this anxiety is reduced can positively impact on a learner's confidence and his or her willingness to engage with other learners. The participants remarked on the difference of WTC in the classroom and in the blogs, "some people wrote heaps and heaps in their blogs, and talked very little in class". This is also reflected in the uptake of the blogging activity from the class as a whole; as one student observed: "I am quite impressed how many people did it every week, in other courses I do there are always people who never hand in their homework or do tutorial assignments. We had a much larger percentage in this class where it seemed to me like everyone was coming to class and was doing their blogs and sticking to it."

A personal space

The blog was perceived as a more personal - and a less threatening - space for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of students wrote their blogs in their home environment. As one student explained: "most people have computers at home, so you can be doing it at midnight, you know, really comfortable surroundings, you are not in some computer lab at the University and that makes you more casual, you are sitting in your living room curled up on your sofa with the cat and typing something that puts you into a mindset that is more personal". For most students computers had become an integral part of their lives and the interaction with the computer itself made blogging "feel more personal". Their ubiquitous access to networked computers, gave students the feeling that their blog was "always there". (This became particularly relevant when three class members went overseas during the semester and continued to blog.) Learners felt in control of their blogs because they could "always change it if you want, it's in your reach all the time". Unlike the spoken word or the handed-in assignment, blogs entries remain in the control of the blogger and can always be modified, improved, or deleted. By drawing the language learning activity in the realm of their personal lives, students started feeling less vulnerable and as a consequence more open in expressing themselves and in engaging with other learners.

The second reason concerns the blog space itself. The L2 bloggers of this class took some pride in personalising their blogs by choosing different templates and by adding photos and sometimes even videos. This is a characteristic feature of blogging, as boyd (2006) explains: "... bloggers speak of it being *their* blog. Bloggers discuss their blogs as though it is their home and others are invited to come over" (para 48). One student conveyed precisely this idea in his first blog post: *Servus! Mein Name ist AB und mir gehoert dieses Blog. Sitzen sie sich angenehm hin und genießen sie was ich zu schreiben hab.* [Welcome! My name is AB and this blog belongs to me. Sit down comfortably and enjoy what I have to write...]. boyd argues that it is the control of the blogger over his or her blog which gives it "this sense of ownership that makes the blog feel like a personal space" (para 48).

The participants admitted that they prepared their blogs for their readers (not unlike hosts who prepare their homes for visitors). One student said she put more effort into it, knowing that "other people are looking" and another one explained in more detail: "there was that sort of subtle pressure that you knew that people were going to look to see to make sure you wrote it, that made you do it. It was nice - I should do it, they are going to come and see and if I don't have everything there - You try and make it good, you spend a bit more time on it." Interestingly, these students describe their blogs as a physical space, in which they expect people to "come" and see" what is there, or to have a "look". They also talked about their blogs as places where they could "meet everybody", and have a conversation.

A conversational space

While talking in front of an audience was intimidating for most students, the participants expressed that writing for an audience was a positive experience. They feared the reactions of others in the classroom, but they were looking forward to receiving comments on their blogs. Some said they published their weekly blog post early in order to get their classmates' attention and to receive more comments. Leaving

comments on the other side was initially difficult for some students, “really daunting at first”. Once they got more familiar with the online environment, they left more comments and interacted increasingly with each other. They felt that “by leaving little comments, it brings more German into everyday life. You have conversations about normal things”, and that “it was cool, like, so what do you think about this, Maddy”. Blogging enabled them to have conversations with each other, which they felt they could not have had in class. Sitting in different parts of the classroom, they found it was “not easy to go to people and talk to them, so it’s much better commenting on blogs”. They also told me, “when you are teaching we can’t really have a conversation with one another”. I do not doubt that these students had conversations during my class, but most likely they would have been in English. They would have only spoken in German if I had told them to engage in an oral activity. In their blogs, however, which was their own German space, everything they wrote was in the L2, from personal reflections and learning experiences to communications with other learners.

The written interactions were often perceived as conversations, a term participants repeatedly used to refer to their written exchanges. The conversational nature of blogging has been mentioned in Nardi, Schirano and Gumbrecht (2004) who suggest “that blogging is as much about reading as writing, as much about *listening* as *talking* (p. 231, italics added).” Boyd (2006) conceptualises this phenomenon and argues that “using terms like *reading* and *listening* interoperably ... signals fluidity between the literary and oral qualities of blogging” (para 40). For this group of students, blogging seemed to fulfill both the purpose of talking to others and writing for an audience. This participant for example contrasted his blog writing with conventional essay writing: “Essays are completely different, short comments and go into the bin straight away, but with a blog you know people read it and you get feedback. That’s the thing. When you write essays, you spend all that time, you hand it in, it comes back and then it goes in the bin, you know, and one lecturer has read it at three in the morning, two minutes, he’s got a big pile of them or something. So it was quite good that others [could read it].” This statement (which was supported by the other participants) put blogging not only in contrast to product-oriented assessment practices. It also contradicts the assumption from skeptics like Richardson (2006) who claimed that “students who are asked to blog are blogging for an audience of one, the teacher” (p. 24). It shows that these students were looking for feedback and recognition and that the interactions with their classmates brought meaning and purpose to their learning activities.

A communal space

Reading about their classmates’ experiences provided students with a feeling of comfort and security. Unlike textbooks or other reading materials, which were often perceived as irrelevant and too difficult, they could relate and identify with the blogs of their classmates, as explained by this participant: “I am very comfortable with blogs because they use the same grammatical level, and same range of vocab that you can read it and actually understand it whereas you get a newspaper, what’s that word, what’s that word. Generally, you can quickly and easily read someone’s blog and it’s not a trial. You talk about the same things, understand it all. It feels nice to read without a dictionary and without a lot of pain.” They shared learning activities and engaged in new ones as they discovered them in their classmates’ blogs, like this participant explains, “I only started watching *Alisa* [a German video podcast] because others were writing about it”.

Reading each other’s blogs also helped students to overcome learning anxieties. They felt less isolated with their problems - “you are never really alone, there is always someone else that will feel the same way” -, and found allies in their classmates, “after you read other people’s blogs,... it’s okay if you feel that way, it’s okay to say you don’t understand something, because others feel the same, it’s like we are all in the same boat”, “it made you feel comfortable, admitting that you weren’t finding it so easy. When you have trouble with grammar, or whatever...”. Empathising with others also had an uplifting effect on some, they found it “encouraging” to see how others dealt with learning issues, giving them the feeling that “I can do this, too”.

The participants found that “seeing everyone else’s blogs and commenting, it was a really good sense of community”. The online interactions often triggered further engagement in class, as this student said “I hardly really knew John, but it was only because the time on the blog - and then you talk in class because you left a comment”. Through reading each other’s blogs and commenting, the class grew closer together, “you actually feel you are getting to know these people”. As a consequence, interest groups formed, “after a while it was often the same people that you found yourself relating to”. Students found others they wanted to talk to/ write for because they genuinely had something to say to each other.

Conclusion

The interviews confirm that L2 blogs can be perceived as protected spaces. The limited interactivity provided learners with control over their interactions and lessened their anxiety, the access to and individualisation of their personal blog space provided them with a sense of ownership and the occurrence of common experiences and interests engaged them in interactions, which were meaningful and relevant to them. Control and affiliation motives determine to a large degree to whom a specific person will speak. Blogging has given these students a protected environment in which they felt in control and in which they could find like-minded people to share their experiences. It has created a willingness to communicate (WTC), which, according to MacIntyre *et al.* (1998) is the “ultimate goal of the learning process” and “a proper objective for L2 education” (p. 547). Like most bloggers, these L2 bloggers were aware of their readers and presented themselves in the light of their audience. They undoubtedly had to balance their contributions and find an equilibrium between personal views and expectations of classmates and teachers, yet, they described themselves throughout the interviews as people, rather than students, indicating that they felt personally engaged in a real-life learning activity.

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