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Revista de Educación Mediática y TIC



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Fecha de recepción: 24/02/2014
Fecha de revisión: 26/05/2014
Fecha de aceptación: 10/11/2014

Practicing your English writing skills in a community learning through an Edublog

La práctica de la escritura en la lengua inglesa en una comunidad de aprendizaje a través de un blog educativo

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Resumen:

En esta investigación, combinamos la competencia digital, en este caso el uso de un blog y la competencia cultural con el fin de practicar las habilidades de escritura. A través del blog queremos cuestionar los métodos tradicionales de enseñanza como la teoría del desarrollo social de Vygotsky y se propone un cambio de roles. Los estudiantes ya no escriben sólo para el profesor, sino también para sus compañeros de clase e incluso para cualquier persona que lee el blog. Además, no sólo el profesor da retroalimentación a ellos, sino también sus compañeros de clase. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes disfrutaron de este cambio de roles. Esta investigación se divide en una introducción de la interacción social de blogs educativos para comprender mejor lo que significa, el método con la explicación de la unidad didáctica y del blog, los resultados y la discusión indican que los estudiantes prefieren trabajar con el blog que con los materiales tradicionales, el uso del blog de practicar las habilidades de escritura motiva a los estudiantes a aprender y la eficacia de la utilización del blog en el aula para crear una comunidad de aprendizaje.

Palabras claves: competencia comunicativa, material educativo, destreza de la escritura en inglés y educación secundaria.

Abstract:

In this research, we combine digital competence, in this case the use of a blog and cultural competence in order to practice the writing skills. Through the blog we want to challenge the traditional teaching methods as Vygotsky' social development theory and we propose a change of roles. Students do not write anymore only for the teacher, but also for their classmates and even for anyone who reads the blog. In addition, not only the teacher gives feedback to them as well as their classmates. Results show that students enjoyed this change of roles and find it interesting and motivating. This research is divided in an introduction from social interaction to Edublogs to understand better what it means. In the method section, we explain the didactic unit and the blog. The results and discussion indicate that students prefer not only working with the blog than with traditional materials, but using the blog to practice the writing skills motivates students to learn. Finally, we show the efficacy of using the blog in the classroom to create a community of learning.

Keywords: blended-learning, higher education, research.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Digital and cultural competence

When we live in a particular country, we automatically become exposed and accustomed to a range of images and symbols embedded in songs and pictures, places and customs. These images and symbols include famous people about culture, architectural and landscape features such as the White House in Washington and the white cliffs of Dover. Familiarity with these images helps students to feel more confident and to become more fluent (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993).

Intercultural language learning is a stance on language teaching and learning that emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the importance of intercultural understanding as a goal of language education. The importance of developing intercultural communicative competence alongside linguistic competence has resulted from learners' needs for acquiring intercultural skills for cross-cultural communication in which they may encounter linguistic cultural barriers. Language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship (Ho, 2009). Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that "language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other".

Digital literacy consists of the ability to access digital media and ICT, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of digital media and media contents and to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts (Mutka, Punie & Rechecker, 2008). Digital competence, as defined in the EC Recommendation on Key Competences (EC, 2006) involves the confident and critical use of ICT for employment, learning, self-development and participation in society. This broad definition of digital competence provides the necessary context for working, living and learning in the knowledge society.

1.2 Social interaction (Vygotsky)

Vygotsky believed that development is a process that should be analyzed, instead of a product to be obtained. According to Vygotsky, the development process that begins at birth and continues until death is too complex to be defined by stages (Driscoll, 1994; Hausfather, 1996). Vygotsky believed that this life long process of development was dependent on social interaction and that

social learning actually leads to cognitive development. This phenomenon is called the Zone of Proximal Development. So a student can perform a task under adult guidance or with peer collaboration that could not be achieved alone. The Zone of Proximal Development bridges that gap between what is known and what can be known. Vygotsky claimed that learning occurred in this zone (Riddle & Dabbagh, 1999).

Vygotsky's theory, however, requires the teacher and students to play untraditional roles as they collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher dictating her meaning to students for future recitation, a teacher should collaborate with the students in order to create meaning in ways that students can make their own (Hausfather, 1996). Learning becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and the teacher. Individuals participating in peer collaboration or guided teacher instruction must share the same focus in order to access the zone of proximal development (Hausfather, 1996). Furthermore it is essential that the partners be on different developmental levels and the higher level partner dominates, the interaction is less successful (Driscoll, 1994; Hausfather, 1996). Scaffolding and reciprocal teaching are effective strategies to access the zone of proximal development (Hausfather, 1996). Reciprocal teaching allows for the creation of a dialogue between students and teachers. This two way communication becomes an instructional strategy by encouraging students to go beyond answering questions and engage in the discourse (Driscoll, 1994; Hausfather, 1996).

1.3 E-learning

Does a virtual leaning environment refer to any educational web site? No. However as many fashionable words, some authors use it in a very broad way, including for instance Web sites that simply include static Web pages. Virtual learning environments can be identified by the following features:

- A virtual learning environment is a designed information space.
- A virtual leaning environment is a social space: educational interactions occur in the environment, turning space into places.
- The virtual space is explicitly represented.
- Students are not only active, but also actors: they co-construct the virtual space.
- Virtual leaning environments are not restricted to distance education:

they also enrich classroom activities.

- Virtual learning environments integrate heterogeneous technologies and multiple pedagogical approaches.
- Most virtual environments overlap with physical environments.

For learning environments, there are some functional requirements:

- Using information in educational interactions
- Multi-authoring. The information stored in a virtual learning environment is produced by many authors.
- Indicating information source. Web information without explicit information regarding to its author will soon have no more value.
- Maintaining information
- Following technical evolution
- Sharing information with the world

A set of web pages does not constitute a virtual learning environment unless there is social interaction about or around the information (Dillenburg, Schneider & Synteta, 2002). Downes (2005) states that e-learning as we know it has been around ten years or so. During that time, it has emerged from being a radical idea to something that is widely regarded as mainstream. It's the core to numerous business plans and a service offered by most colleagues and universities. And now, e-learning is evolving with the World Wide Web as a whole and it is changing to a degree significant enough to warrant a new name: e-learning 2.0. What was happening was that major parts of the World Wide Web were acquiring the properties of communications networks, the sorts of networks found to exist in the physical world. Proponents of this new, evolving Web began calling it Web 2.0 and in short order the trend became a movement. What people were doing with the Web was not merely reading books, listening to the radio or watching TV, but having a conversation, with a vocabulary consisting not just of words but of images, video, multimedia and whatever they could get their hands on. And this became, and looked like, and behaved like a network. Nowhere is this clearer than in the world of blogging. In a few short years the blog went from a few idiosyncratic Web sites to something used by millions of people empowerment by content creation tools such as Blogger and Wordpress. For all this technology, what is important

to recognize is that the emergence of the Web 2.0 is not a technological revolution, it is a social revolution. Web 2.0 is an attitude not a technology.

1.4 Edublogs

Huette (2006) states that a blog (or weblog) is a website in which items are posted and displayed with the newest at the top. Like other media, blogs often focus on a particular subject, such as food, politics... Some blogs function as online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images and links to other blogs. Web pages and other media related to its topic. Since its appearance in 1995, blogging has emerged as a popular means of communication, affecting public opinion and mass media around the world. Winer (2003) defines the term blogging as writing your thoughts into your blog, and the "blogosphere" a term coined by William Quick (2001), is the "intellectual cyberspace" that bloggers occupy.

Blogs are useful teaching and learning tools because they provide a space for students to reflect and publish their thoughts and understandings. And because blogs can be commented on, they provide opportunities for feedback and potential scaffolding of new ideas. Blogs also feature hyperlinks, which help students begin to understand the relational and contextual basis of knowledge construction and meaning making (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). Blood (2002) suggests that a blog is designed to be visited frequently. This concept is represented by the reverse chronological order of the posts that allow readers to easily identify the most recent posts made to the page since the last visit. Huette (2006) defines the term blog as a blend of the terms web and log, leading to weblog, and finally blog. Authoring a blog, maintain a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called blogging. Individual articles on a blog are called "blog posts", "posts", or "entries". A person who posts these entries is called a blogger. A blog entry typically consists of the following (Huette, 2006):

Title. Main title or headline of the post.

Body. Main content of the post.

Comments. Comments added by readers.

Permalink. The URL of the full, individual article.

Post Date. Date and time the post was published
A blog entry optionally includes the following (Huette, 2006):

Categories or tags. Subjects that the entry discusses.

Trackback. Links to other sites that refer to the entry.

A blog site typically contains a list of links, or blog roll, of other blogs that the blog author reads or affiliates with (Huette, 2006). Lara (2005) states that the term "edublog" comes through the combination of education + blog. So we can understand this term as those blogs whose main objective is to support the teaching and learning process in an educational context. "An interactive conversation during a journey through knowledge" (SáezVacas, 2005). The education must assume the challenge of the digital literacy of the citizens so that they could do a free and responsible use of the internet resources. A proposed prototype of teaching with blogs within a constructivist pedagogy understand the blog as a means of personal and belongs to the student. So you can use it in your academic life and not within a given subject. The teacher's role in this model would be the facilitator in this new area of freedom, accompanying the student on their own path of experimentation and learning through the blog (O'Donell, 2005). Blogs and the education itself are by nature processes of communication, socialization and knowledge construction (Efimova & De Moor, 2005). One of its most important features is the ability to interactivity, which allows the blog move from a monologue to a dialogue in a constant invitation to conversation. In this way, students can receive feedback from other students or participants in the debate and become more aware of their own learning (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004). The teacher is no longer the only addressee of the student's production and becomes one among all the reader of the Network (Lara, 2005). Blogs are in between traditional classroom teaching and e-learning systems (Oravec, 2003). On the one hand, blogs represent an opportunity for socialization between teachers and students in a more informal space than classrooms. On the other hand, students improve their writing skills and concentrate their efforts in the narrative, giving more importance to content than on form (Huffaker, 2004). The fact that it is public creates a sense of responsibility in students, who risk their own reputation on the internet and values his work above what could be an academic requirement addressed exclusively to the teacher (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

Harris & Rea (2009) state that there are many ways that students benefit

when using blogs. Some of these uses include:

They allow students to practice reflective writing

They can be used for assignment submission and review

They can be used for dialogue for group work

They can enhance knowledge sharing and knowledge management

E-portfolios can be created by using blogs

They also think that using blogs for education has also some advantages as the following ones.

Students become part of the lesson. When Web 2.0 technologies are used in an IS class, students become part of the lesson. They have the opportunity to be an active part of the class. Web 2.0 technologies can engage the students and allow them to contribute to the lesson in an active manner, thus becoming a part of the lesson.

The World becomes the classroom. The best way to learn is to become active. Web 2.0 technologies expand the classroom to the virtual world and allow the world to become the classroom. Because of easy access to the virtual world, the lesson can be open to anyone; it is not confined to a single classroom or a single set of students. This allows students to easily work across boundaries with others who may have different cultures, values and interests.

Collaboration and competition increases learning. Most web 2.0 technologies have aspects of collaboration and competition. They allow students to work together, or to compete with one another on projects. When web 2.0 and virtual world technologies are used for collaboration and competition in the classroom, learning can increase.

The classroom is available 24/7. All of the web 2.0 technologies are Internet based. This means they are available to students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. A student simply needs an Internet connection and he/she can be in the classroom. As a result, students can interact in a classroom environment when they are best prepared.

2. Objective

The objective of this project is to create a blog in a learning community. Traditionally teachers are seen as knowledge providers. In the blog, students will be not only active but actors. We would like learning to become a reciprocal

experience for the students and the teacher. We want to focus on implementing the ICT in the classroom and show whether it works or not as a community of learning. In this case, we are going to focus on creating a blog as a community of learning as the introduction and integration of computer technology in society has tremendously increased the opportunities for social interaction (Riddle & Dabbagh, 1995).

3. Method

3.1. Students and school setting

The city in which this didactic unit is going to be performed in Vinaròs. Vinaròs is located in the eastern Spain, in the province of Castelló and part of the autonomous Valencian Community. This didactic unit is going to be implemented with the students of the first year of A level. In the classroom there are 35 students and they are studying the scientific A level. There are more or less the same number of boys and girls. There are students from different levels but we do not observe a high difference between levels.

❖ Specific objectives

- To produce written texts (posts)
- To produce comments on their peer's posts
- To use the blog as a writing means
- To read texts to obtain information
- To use the ICT as a learning tool

❖ Contents

- Autonomous Reading of texts related to cultural issues
- Use of various resources of information.
- Production of simple and guided texts with some cohesion elements that clearly marks the relationship between ideas and using basic strategies in the writing process.
- Reflexing on the writing process with a focus on the draft review.
- Evaluation of the use of languages as a means to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds

- Identification of common features and the most significant differences between customs, attitudes and values of the society whose language is studied and the self.
 - Knowledge of the most significant cities, attractions, festivities and celebrities of the UK obtaining information by diverse means, including internet and other information and communication technologies.
 - Students value the importance of learning new cultural topics about the UK.
 - Getting involved in the blog.
 - Students value the English language as a communication tool.
 - Students show interest in commenting the peer's posts.
- ❖ Methodology
- Seminar for the introductory session
 - Autonomous work (Blog)
- ❖ Materials
- *Questionnaire*. It is a questionnaire to find out how much they know about the UK. The questionnaire has 10 basic questions about the UK we thought it could be interesting. They can do the questionnaire in pairs to comment about the question with their partner.
 - *List of topics*. In this list they can find some of the topics about UK. They can write the post about the topics of the list or whatever they want to. We designed the list of topics around four basic categories: attractions, cities, festivities and celebrities because within these categories there are a lot of topics, we also think
 - That they need this kind of list because in order to not get lost. So, if they do not write about one of the topics on the list, the topic they choose must fit in one of these categories.
 - *List of Web pages*. In this list they can find some web pages where they can find useful information about some of the topics. This is only a reference list, we have chosen this web page because most of them are official web pages and in the case the students do not know where they can find this type of information, they can started by those pages. This list is also on the blog

- *Sheet of "Instructions and Reflexive Diary"*. Here they can find the instructions about what they are going to do with the blog activity and then the questions they are going to answer for the reflexive diary.

❖ Timing

- 34 sessions

❖ Development

1st session "Introductory session":

- Brainstorming about what they know about the UK.
- Questionnaire in pair groups to find out how do they know about the UK.
- Presentation with the support of a power point with the answers of the questionnaire and presenting them some issues they are going to work in the
- blog in order to motivate them to participate on the blog: Keep calm and blog English.
- Presentation of the blog, explanation of what they are going to do with the blog. Explanation and handing out the sheets about the possible topics and web pages where they can look for information about the topic they have chosen. It is an open list, it serves as a guide list of topics

Remaining sessions:

- One student chooses one topic (it could be a topic on the list the teacher has given previously or a topic chosen by him / her).
- The student looks for information related to that topic on the web pages that are on the reference list that the teacher gave or on other ones.
- He / she writes a composition about the topic with 80 words more or less. The student can add also images, videos, links...
- The teacher corrects the composition not in terms of content but in terms of form.
- The student uploads his / her post to the blog.
- The other students must write about what their peer has uploaded according to content, personal experiences, believes, feelings...

❖ BLOG: Keep calm and blog English:

<http://www.keepcalmandblogenglish.blogspot.com.es/>

In figure 1, we can observe an overall view of the homepage of the blog.

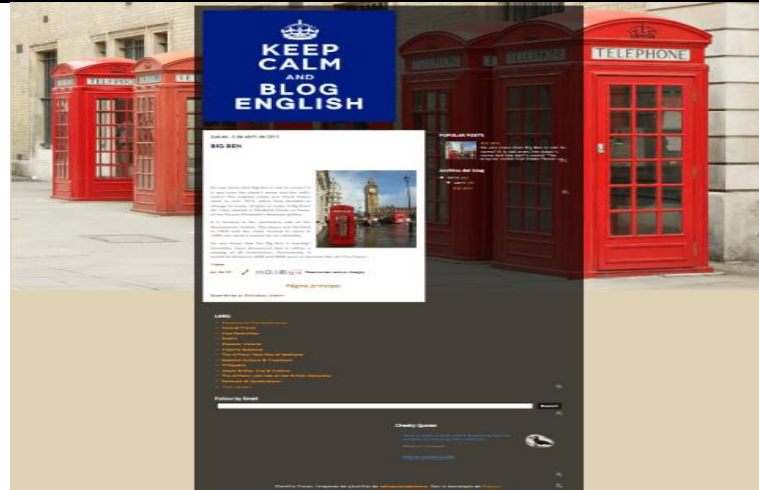


Figure 1: Blog's title and homepage

In figure 2 we observe the first post or entry made by the teacher in order the students to know what they are going to do and what the teacher wants them to do. We can also observe some gadgets. On the right we can observe "popular post" with a little picture and a brief summary. Under "popular posts" we can observe "blog archive" it is ordered by date.

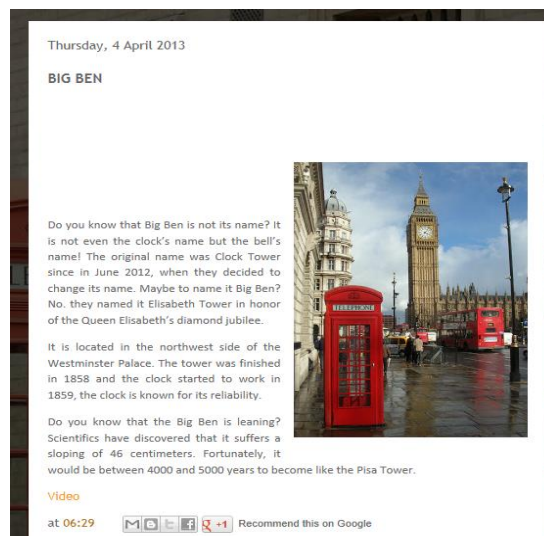


Figure 2: First post

❖ Assessment

ASSESSMENT: KEEP CALM AND BLOG ENGLISH		
Reflexive Diary	1 point	10%
Posts	0.5 point	5 %
Comments	0.5 point	5 %
	2 points	20 %

Figure 3: Assessment Schedule for the introductory session

❖ Questionnaires

In order to know about students and teacher's opinions of the activity, we prepare a questionnaire for the students and one for the teacher (see tables 1 and 2)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
I am aware of the benefits the ICT have					
I usually use ICT in my English lessons					
I would like to use ICT but I find difficulties					
I don't want to use ICT					
I don't mind to use ICT					

Table 1: Teacher's questionnaire

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
I find it difficult to work with the blog					
I enjoyed working with the blog					
I am more motivated with the blog than with traditional materials					
I prefer writing the essays on the blog					
I prefer writing the essays on a paper (traditional way)					
I prefer writing with the blog than on a paper*					

Table 2: Students' questionnaire

4. Results and discussion

The didactic unit presented in this research has a total of 34 sessions. This didactic unit has been designed to be implemented in a class of A level. However, to carry out this research, it has not been possible to put the 34 sessions into practice, since currently we do not work in a secondary school and the internship only lasted 2 months and we only had the opportunity to implement this didactic unit when my tutor let me to do it. I could only implement 4 sessions: the introductory session, where we presented them the blog, we did a questionnaire about the UK, a brainstorming... and three more sessions, in which the students uploaded their posts and their classmates added a comment about it. We also had a questionnaire about the blog activity. When we asked the students to answer the questionnaire and the reflexive diary we told them they could do it in Spanish, Catalan or English. It was not compulsory to answer them in English because the aim of the questionnaires and the reflexive diary was not the level of English but their answer and we wanted them to be as true as possible. The results of the questionnaire are explained below.

4.1. Analysis of the student's questionnaire

In this section, we are going to analyse the students' answers about the questionnaire "Students' questionnaire". We address each of the research statements in three categories: Problems with the blog, motivation and students' preferences.

4.1.1. Problems with the blog

The first statement asked whether the learners find difficult to work with the blog. If learners find difficult to work with the blog it would not be possible to work with a community learning such as the blog. In the introductory session, the teacher explained them how the blog works and what they have to do to add a comment on the blog. When a teacher wants to implement ICTs in their lessons teachers may worry about students having problems when using them alone in their homes. In this particular research, once I learned how to use the blog, the students learned very quickly how to work with it and most of them did not have any problems as the results show. Results show that 31% of the students strongly disagree and 34% disagree with the statement "I find it difficult to work with the blog" and only 3 % of the students strongly agree with the statement. So, only a few students had problems

when using the blog. The problem they had was that some of them could not upload their comments. We can say that the blog is a tool that can be implemented at schools as it is easy to manage by students and teachers.

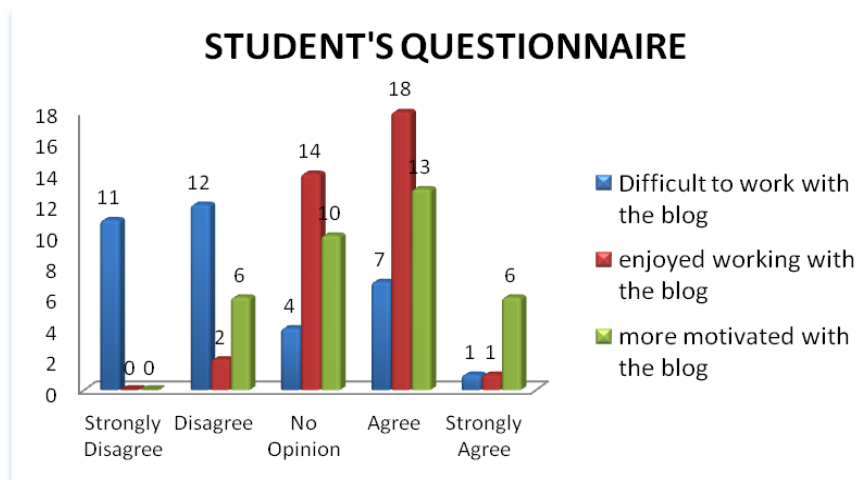


Figure 4: Student's answers

4.1.2 Motivation

Motivating students in the process of learning is one of the most important tasks that teachers must accomplish. We think that a blog is a tool that can motivate students in the process of learning as it is more informal, they can add comments whenever and wherever they want. In the statement "I am more motivated with the blog than with traditional materials" 37% of the students agree and 17% of the students disagree. Anyone strongly disagree and 17% strongly agree. With the statement "I enjoyed working with the blog" anyone strongly disagree and only 6% disagree. So we can say that blogs motivate students, maybe because it is something new and this motivates them.

4.1.3 Preferences at working with

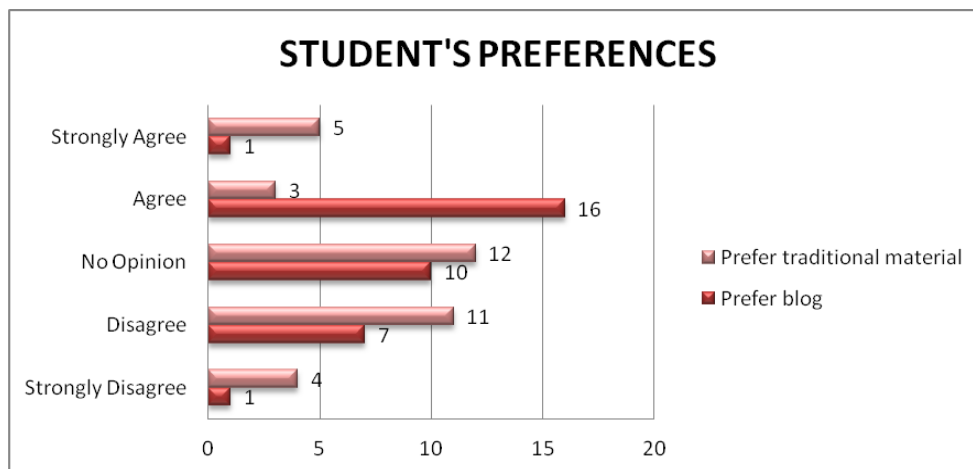


Figure 5: Student's preferences

In figure 5 we can clearly observe that students prefer working their writing skills with the blog than with traditional materials. They usually hand their writings on a paper sheet to their teacher and the teacher gives them back corrected. With the blog, students hand to the teacher their essay and the teacher corrects the essay in term of form. Their classmates can observe their essays and they also can comment on them. They also were asked why they prefer writing with the blog than on paper. Most of them answered that they prefer working with the blog because it is more interesting, easier and quicker, because you can add videos, pictures..., most of them also find interesting to read their classmates posts and comments because it is interactive.

4.2 Analysis of the secondary school teacher's questionnaire

The secondary school teacher is in the classroom in the introductory session but he is not when the students are working with the blog as they add comments at home. However he knows the address of the blog so he has access to the blog when he wants.

The secondary school teacher's questionnaire is divided into two sections. The first one follows the type of scaled questions and the second one is a list about advantages and disadvantages ICT has.

4.2.1 The use of ICT

The secondary school teacher strongly agrees in the statement: "I am aware of the benefits the ICT have". He agrees in the statement "I usually use ICT in my English lessons" so he strongly disagrees in the statement "I don't want to use ICT". Finally he

agrees in the statement "I would like to use ICT but I find difficulties" in this statement he answered the question "Why?" and he said "Lack of appropriate spaces and materials".

4.2.2 Advantages and disadvantages of ICT

In the second part of the secondary school teacher's questionnaire he named three advantages and three disadvantages about the use of ICT in education. The three advantages he states are that "ICT motivates students, you can use real material and it is updated". When he is required to name three disadvantages about the use of ICT he only writes one disadvantage: "It doesn't always work (Connection problems)".

5.1 Analysis of the reflexive diary

At the end of the blog activity students had to answer a reflexive diary. In the reflexive diary the students must answer some questions about what they have learned and how they learned it. The questions are in English but if they want they can answer them in Spanish or Catalan because what is important in the reflexive diary is not the level of English but the process. The questions they had to answer in the reflexive diary were the following:

5.1.1 How did you feel about the blog?

Most of the students answered that at the beginning they thought that it was a good idea as it is a different way to learn English. They also thought that it was a very interesting activity so they feel motivated. On the other hand only some of them did not like the blog activity because they prefer the traditional way, they also seemed that they had more work as they were required to comment on the posts.

5.1.2 What have you learned?

The majority of the students answered that they learned the information that was on the posts, which was new for most of them. Others learned how to use a blog.

5.1.3 How did you learn it?

They learned all these looking for information to write the post or adding a comment. They also learned by reading the post and their classmates comments.

5.1.4 What did you enjoy most or least?

Most of the students enjoyed most the posts and the comments; they really enjoyed reading their classmates posts and being able to add comments. It was something

new for them, as they usually write the essays only for the teacher. They also enjoyed being at their homes talking with their partners in English. They also enjoyed learning new things and working with the computer as it is motivating and funny.

6. Conclusion

Mutka et al. (2008) argue that learning digital skills not only needs to be addressed as a separate subject but also embedded within teaching in all subjects. In this research, we combine digital competence, in this case the use of a blog and cultural competence in order to practice the writing skills. Through the blog we want to challenge the traditional teaching methods as Vygotsky' social development theory and we propose a change of roles. Students do not write anymore only for the teacher, but for the teacher, their classmates and even anyone who reads the blog. In addition, not only the teacher gives feedback to them but also their classmates.

Results show that students enjoyed this change of roles and find it interesting and motivating. To implement all this we thought that one of the best tools would be a blog because blogs create a virtual learning environment and supports social interaction. Blogs also are designed to be visited frequently, are presented in chronological order, can be commented on so they provide opportunities of feedback and provide a space for students to reflect and publish their thoughts and understandings. We take all this into account and created an Edublog which main objective was to support the teaching and learning process in an educational context because blogs and education itself are by nature processes of communication and knowledge construction as Efimova & De Moor (2005) said. In conclusion, results suggest

1. The efficacy of using the blog in the classroom to create a community of learning
2. The students prefer working with the blog than with traditional materials as it is a different way to learn English
3. Using the blog to practice the writing skills motivates students to learn.

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Cómo citar este artículo:

Arseguet Crisol, S. y Renau, M. L. (2015). Practicing your English writing skills in a community learning through an Edublog. *EDMETIC, Revista de Educación Mediática y TIC*, 4(1), 9-29.