

## The Effect of Making Weblogs with Respect to Gender on Elementary Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Development

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the effect of making weblogs on male and female elementary Iranian EFL students' vocabulary development. There are both male and female learners in this study and researchers investigate the effect of making weblogs with respect to gender on elementary Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary development. To ensure the criterion of homogeneity, a PET was administered. In the first session, a pretest was administered and at the end of the course a posttest was administered. After teaching vocabulary, the teacher asked learners to make weblogs and use those words in their weblogs. There was a two-month interval between the pretest and posttest. The result of the statistical analysis confirmed that there is no significance difference between male and female learners in this research.

**Keywords:** weblog, vocabulary, elementary learners, EFL learners

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The importance of learning vocabulary in foreign language teaching cannot be neglected at all. However, the best means of achieving good vocabulary learning is still unclear, partly because it depends on a wide variety of factors (de Groot, 2006). Celce-Murcia (2002) considers vocabulary learning central to language acquisition. The more words you know, the more you will be able to understand what you hear and read and the better you will be able to say what you want to when speaking or writing. Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed (Wilkins, 1972).

So, learning vocabulary is a very important part of learning a language. Until now, many strategies for learning vocabulary have been used and their usefulness in learning of

vocabulary has been proved based on findings but it is not clear which strategies are more useful for learning vocabulary.

Recent studies on educational uses of weblogs show that blogs can be used in education effectively and students' attitudes to blogs is very affirmative (Du and Wagner, 2005; Glogoff, 2005). Blog provides learning opportunities for learning English by the types of tasks the students engaged in (Kavaliaukiene et al., 2006). New modern ways have been sought for the use of information technologies in foreign course and how these technologies to be transferred in more effective way.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Vocabulary

According to many studies, it is virtually impossible to achieve palpable progress in English without expanding vocabulary in parallel. Vocabulary plays an important role in word recognition. Beginning readers use knowledge of words from speech to recognize words that they encounter in print. If a match is not created, because the word they are reading is not found in their vocabulary, comprehension is interrupted. This is the case even if they are able to generate the correct pronunciation through the decoding process.

### B. The Process of Learning New Vocabulary

Muensorn and Tepsuriwong (2009) stated the three stages proposed by (Nation, 2001) which may contribute to a learner's learning of a vocabulary item namely noticing, retrieval and creative or generative use. The first stage involves identifying and giving attention to the words as an item to be learned. Laufer, (1997) believes that this is an important stage as it affects the extent to which the word is picked up and learned. Thus the more words involved in learning, the deeper the level of processing and memorizing will take place. The second stage, retrieval is where learners recall the learned words from their memory. Nation (2001) indicates that most research found learning to be optimized when retrieval is spaced rather than massed. It can be said that this stage contains recalling knowledge in the same way it was originally stored. Learners may recognize the forms and meanings of the words they learned and uses of the words in new contexts. Creative or generative stage is where learners have enough vocabulary in that they can use words for communication as the words learned become active and is used effectively and productively in different contexts. It can be either productive or receptive, and is believed to be an important contributing process in first and second language vocabulary learning (Nation, 2001: p.68). In order for it to be achieved, learners have to know enough about the words; meanings, forms and uses. These aspects are significant as learners need to practice using the vocabulary learned actively to enhance both retrieval and creative use.

### *C. Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

Eleni, Stavros & Athina (2009) stated that according to Ruutemets (2005) vocabulary learning strategies constitute knowledge about what learners do to find out the meaning of new words, retain them in long-term memory, recall them when needed in comprehension and use them in language production. The definition relates to the phases or processes above mentioned in which the last stage encourages learners to apply the strategies namely discovery and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies are used for gaining initial information about a new word (Schmitt, 2000). The most common strategies in this area take the form of memorizing, repetition and note-taking. It is believed that the strategies seem to be self-independent; learners work out the meaning of the new words by themselves socially – based on interaction with other people. The latter may also mean that learners get the word meaning by asking other people or through their interaction with others as well as through dictionaries. Whilst, consolidation strategies is used to reinforce and remember a word once it has been introduced (Schmitt, 2000). These strategies include a more in-depth look at the meaning which employ tactics such as inferencing, imagery, active manipulation and key-word technique. It is also categorized into four main strategy groups; memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social. Memory strategy includes memorization techniques such as grouping a word with its association, using key words, semantic mapping and reviewing in a structured way. While cognitive strategies are repetition and using mechanical means to study vocabulary, for example keeping of vocabulary notebooks. Furthermore, metacognitive strategies are used by learners to control and evaluate their learning. Among the many activities that can be put applied by learners, such strategies may include planning, monitoring and evaluating. Learners as well can consolidate the word learnt by studying and practicing in groups, with peers or a method of teaching that require social strategies.

### *D. Factors Affecting Vocabulary Learning*

Vocabulary learning is affected by many factors which can be broadly categorized into two groups: words and learners. (Ellis, 2002) mentioned that high frequencies words are more easily recognized than words at low frequencies. This means that the more often the words are come upon; the higher the chance learners are able to remember and learn it. Word learned is called input and its usage is the output. The process of input and output of words involves rote and meaningful learning in which learners are responsible for their own learning. Furthermore, (Schmitt, 2000) adds that, motivation, culture and proficiency are some of the contributors which may affect strategies used by learners.

### *E. Learning Vocabulary: Cognitive Styles and Strategies*

The vocabulary we learn is the part of our declarative memory, more precisely our semantic memory, which stores factual knowledge like the name of the painter who painted *The Starry Night* or what the word ‘blunderbuss’ means; but the process through which these facts get stuck in our memory is not this simple (Goldstein, 2008, pp. 186-188). When a child begins to acquire the native language it happens due to exposure to the

language in the environment. This repeated exposure or ‘meaning-focused input’ is, of course not exclusive to first language acquisition, it also happens during EFL reading and listening. To enhance this so-called incidental learning through reading and listening, three major factors must be met. First, the unknown vocabulary should make up only about two percent of the tokens read or heard. Second, a very large quantity of input (1 million tokens per year) is necessary. Third, the learner must be made to notice the unknown words by simple consciousness-raising or by repeating unknown words in the text (Nation and Meara, 2002, pp. 39-40). Acquisition of new words is not exclusive to only two of the four skills (reading and listening) however, it is not easy to provide examples when a learner comes up with new words during speaking or writing. The two productive skills can be used to increase the vocabulary depth by putting words from our passive/receptive knowledge into use and thus transferring them into the active/productive (controlled in deliberate learning situations vs. free in everyday speaking/writing) vocabulary (Nation and Meara, 2002, pp. 41). Nation and Meara state that the most common way in vocabulary learning and teaching is deliberate vocabulary learning (2002, pp. 41). Also, this method is proved to be more efficient than incidental learning, as Schmidt (1995) suggests that noticing and giving attention to learning always improves the rate of acquisition (pp. 45-49). Deliberate vocabulary learning programs, however, can be reinforced or consolidated in the mind through the aforementioned meaning-focused input and output (Nation and Meara, 2002, pp. 42). Cognitive styles differ from learning styles in a way that its definition is free of educational interference, and thus it can have several meanings based on the field it is applied in (Dörnyei, 2005, pp. 120-123). When discussing L2 learning, two kinds of learners are distinguished based on cognitive styles: the ‘field dependent’ and the ‘field –independent learner. Field-dependent learners are more responsive to their environment and social interactions, and tend to care about the social cues more than field-independents. This style is said to be beneficial when prompted to tasks that emphasized communication rather than formal aspects of a language. Field-independents, however, are in advantage because they have a greater capacity to channel attention selectively and to separate the essential from then inessential (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 137). Despite these obvious differences between the two styles, it has not been proven that either of the two has an overall advantage in language proficiency. With SLA in question, it is useful to consult Willing’s (1994) four language learning styles: 1. Communicative learners, who tend to like watching/listening native speakers, talking to friends, using the language out of classroom context. 2. Analytical learners, who are better at studying grammar, they learn from English books, newspapers and usually like learning alone, analyzing their mistakes. 3. Authority-oriented learners, who prefer the teacher to explain everything and they mostly rely on their notebooks and textbooks. 4. Concrete learners, who tend to like games, pictures, film, video, using cassettes, and practicing English outside class” (Wong and Nunan, 2011, p. 145).

#### *F. Teaching Vocabulary*

As a relatively large amount of language learning happens in the classroom, it is also important to discuss the role of a teacher in vocabulary learning. Nation suggests that the

traditional face-to-face deliberate vocabulary teaching is one of the least efficient ways of developing vocabulary knowledge (2005, p. 1). Despite this claim, Laufer proved that – with appropriate teaching and learning strategies - very convincing developments can be reached: in her research she found out that roughly 8-9 word families (passive vocabulary) can be learnt in every high school lesson, which means an annual improvement of 1,600 word families (Laufer, 1998, pp. 264-266). Learning a word involves knowing several aspects of it (this is called the ‘learning burden’): its meaning, its spoken and written form, its grammatical functions, collocations of the word, restrictions of using the word, the parts from which the word is constructed. Apart from explaining these aspects, it is the teacher’s task to clarify the L2 words similarities or the lack of those to its counterpart in L1 (Nation, 2005, pp. 2-3). Nation offers several vocabulary development activities that require little and also some that require more advance planning by the language teachers. The former include activities like learning to use the dictionary, cutting up words to examine its parts, suggesting collocates, guessing the meaning of the word from context; while the latter involve semantic analyses, crossword puzzles, building word family tables, completing unfinished sentences (Nation, 2005, pp. 3-5). As the students might go against the teacher’s suggestions and learn words using their individual strategies, Laufer and Hulstijn provide a solution that can be applied for every learner in every classroom. The teachers should give the students reading material with an appropriate amount of unknown words (2-3%) and repetition of these words to “force” incidental vocabulary acquisition (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

### *G. Origins of the Term CALL*

The term Computer Assisted Language Learning emerged in the 1980s and originated from the earlier used term of Computer Assisted Language Instruction. As Graham Davies (IS5) states, the reason for this change was the close association of CALI and the outdated teacher centred approach, which drew heavily on behaviourism rather than the currently developing learner centred approach. While CALI was considered the approach entailing “repetitive language drills” and was “referred to as 'drill and practice'” (Warschauer, 1996, p.3), CALL widened its scope, embracing the communicative approach and a range of new technologies Graham Davies (IS5). By the end of the 1980s, a new term was created, which is now considered an alternative to CALL, and which was felt to describe the activities and issues connected with CALL in a clearer and more detailed fashion. The term TELL (the abbreviation standing for Technology Enhanced Language Learning) was adopted by some institutions including the TELL Consortium of University of Hull and the TELL and CALL journal from Austria. Brown (1988, p.6) explains the term writing, Learning a foreign language can enrich the education of every pupil socially and intellectually and be vocationally relevant. The new technology should form an integral part of a modern language department's overall teaching strategy. By these means, to coin a communicative sounding acronym, TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) can help produce telling results in language performance both in school and in the wider world. It therefore has a place in every modern language department. On the other hand, according to Bax (2003, p.23), CALL should not be distinguished among approaches but instead become a natural part of teaching,

therefore not necessitating a name of its own. He writes, Normalisation is therefore the stage when a technology is invisible, hardly even recognized as a technology, taken for granted in everyday life. CALL has not reached this stage, as evidenced by the use of the very acronym 'CALL' — we do not speak of PALL (Pen Assisted Language Learning) or of BALL (Book Assisted Language Learning) because those two technologies are completely integrated into education, but CALL has not yet reached that normalised stage. In other words, one criterion of CALL's successful integration into language learning will be that it ceases to exist as a separate concept and field for discussion. CALL practitioners should be aiming at their own extinction.

#### *H. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)*

Different terminologies have been coined to refer to the use of technology in educational settings including: CAI (Computer-Assisted Instruction), CBI(Computer-Based Instruction), CMI (Computer-Mediated Instruction), TML (Technology-Mediated Learning), CAL (Computer-Assisted Learning), CSL (Computer-Supported Learning), TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning), and CALL(Computer-Assisted Language Learning).Some scholars (Aydin, Mutlu, and Mclsaac, 2007; Watson, Lee, and Reigeluth, 2007) believe that all of these terms more or less refer to the same or similar trend of applying computers in educational contexts. However, one cannot find one current terminology as the standard since, "computers can play different roles in various learning contexts and experts tend to offer various names for the same or similar roles" (Watson, Lee, and Reigeluth, 2007, p. 99).

Nowadays, one of the most widely applied terminologies is CSL and to some extent, in more specific sense CALL, which can be viewed as an umbrella term for different aspects of technology integration in language education. The term that is applied in the discussion of the present study from among the terminologies mentioned above is CALL.

#### *I. Phases in the Development of CALL*

Warschauer (1996), Warschauer and Healey (1998) and Warschauer and Meskill (2000) have considered three phases in the development of CALL: behavioristic (1970s-1980s), communicative (1980s-1990s) and integrative (21st century). It should be noted that each phase corresponds to a certain level of technology and certain pedagogical theories. It must be admitted, however, that these phases do not fall exactly and exclusively within the time ranges mentioned above. Based on the dominant behaviorist theories, the first phase of CALL did not have the privilege to use the internet. This phase called behavioristic CALL enjoyed lots of drill-and-practice work and was interwoven with the entrance of overhead projectors and the computer software for "drill- and-practice" (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Later within the same phase, audio labs and tapes accompanied the audio-lingual method from its emergence to its decline. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the emergence of PCs led to the communicative phase in Warschauer and Meskill's (2000) model. This period can be identified with the two major perspectives on the

implementation of technology in language classes. The first perspective has risen from a cognitive view. “Technologies which support a cognitive approach to language learning are those which allow learners maximum opportunity to be exposed to language in meaningful context and to construct their own individual knowledge.” (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000, p. 304). This cognitive perspective encouraged the use of different types of software, including: text-reconstruction, language games, concordancing, and multimedia simulation. Apparently, online programs and the use of Internet had not entered the language teaching domain yet and the computer was still the “knower-of-the-right answer” (Taylor & Perez, 1989). The second perspective is a socio-cognitive one which lends itself to the view of learner authenticity, social interaction, and authentic material rather than just providing comprehensible input. Two important technological developments including multimedia and internet led to the emergence of integrative CALL (Warschauer, 1996). Varieties of media such as texts, graphics, sound, animation and video were all available on a PC. Since then the use of the Internet in educational settings has witnessed a considerable growth. Warschauer and Meskill (2000) have classified computer application in the integrative phase into the following three formats:

1. Computer-mediated communication in a classroom,
2. Computer-mediated communication for long distance exchange,
3. Accessing resources and publishing on the World Wide Web. (pp.305-6)

The first format could be used for in-and-out-of-classroom discussions. Asynchronous writing tools such as mails, weblogs, and wikis are now available and provide equal learning opportunities for most people (Hartzell, 2007). CALL realized in the form of various online environments with a flexible degree of availability allows learners and teachers to allocate unlimited time to the practice of writing as well (Etter & Merhout, 2007). Thus, students have the opportunity to develop their writing skills via collaborating with other classmates and even native speakers synchronously and asynchronously (Kreeft Peyton, 1999; Rajasingham, 2007). In the following sections, technology and writing are explored in more detail.

#### *J. Application of Blogs in the EFL Classroom*

There are numerous possibilities for a blog to be used in the EFL classroom setting. Current research has already done some tentative explorations in this field (Ward, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Kennedy, 2003; Campbell, 2003). Special mention should be made of Campbell (2003) who made a great contribution by suggesting three types of weblogs, the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog, with each type used in a different way. Thus he unintentionally sketched out a model for weblogs to be put to immediate use with EFL classroom learning. Though not claimed by Campbell himself and imperfect in itself, the so-called “Campbell’s model” is still recognizable in our eyes.

### *K. The Tutor Blog*

This is a type of weblog that is run by the tutor for the learners. It may be used in the following manners:

(1) It gives daily reading practice to the learners. Sometimes students find assigned reading materials are too boring, difficult, or hard to relate with. However, entries are kept short, geared towards the learner interest, and linked to related online sources for further reading if desired. Vocabulary used in class can be recycled this way. New vocabulary words can be linked to definitions on other sites found with a search engine. Furthermore, a casual, natural writing style can be used by the tutor to develop learner familiarity with native language patterns.

(2) It promotes exploration of English websites. Any entry made by the tutor can and ought to encourage further exploration of the Internet in English by linking to related articles, and content based websites. For those learners reluctant to step outside the comfort of exploring the Web in their native language, being led to interesting English language sites will increase their confidence and help to overcome their aversion.

(3) It encourages online verbal exchange by use of comment buttons. At the bottom of each entry, any blog reader can make a comment that can be read and further commented on by all who access the site. Ask your students questions, give them riddles, challenge their views; whatever it takes to encourage them to comment.

(4) It provides class or syllabus information. Entries in the blog can also serve to remind students about homework assignments and upcoming discussion topics. Links can be provided to sites that introduce relevant topics of discussion. The tutor can also follow up on difficult areas of classroom work that might need review or clarification. In addition, a permanent link to the classroom syllabus and rules can be included on the blog.

(5) It serves as a resource of links for self-study. In the right and/or left margins of the blog, permanent links can be set-up and organized to aid the learner in self-study, for example links to online quizzes, English news sites, key-pal networks, audio and video files for listening practice and EFL interactive websites.

### *L. The Learner Blog*

Learner weblogs are either run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners. In TEFL, learner blogs may be best suited for reading and writing classes. A common reading assignment can be followed by blog postings on the thoughts of each learner or group of learners. Furthermore, the act of constructing the blog may encourage the use of search engines and net surfing in English to find the appropriate sites to which links can be made. This will empower the learner to direct the reader to sites of choice for further reading. Individually, blogs can be used as journals for writing practice, or as free-form templates for personal.

### *M. The Class Blog*

This type of blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. The following are some possible uses:

(1) In conversation-based classes it could be used like a free-form bulletin board for learners to post messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. It could also be a space for them to post thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework.

(2) With intermediate and advanced learners, class blogs might also be useful for facilitating project-based language learning, where learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others.

(3) Class blogs could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange. In this scenario, learners from different countries would have joint access and publishing rights to the blog. The entire exchange would then be transparent to all readers and could be followed and commented on by other learners, tutors, parents and friends.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### *A. Participants*

The experiment was run with 15 male and 15 female students in Jahade-daneshgahi in Sahneh. The average age of the students was 16 and their level of English was supposed to be elementary. They were trained how to make a weblog.

### *B. Instruments*

The research instruments in this research were a pre-test and a post test (the same as the pre- test) that were researcher made, a 20 multiple-choice vocabulary test, According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was 0.71 and a PET test for determining the participants' level of language proficiency.

### *C. Procedures*

At first the participants of this group were required to make a weblog page by using the free and user-friendly blog provider, blogfa. For this group, the first session was allocated to familiarizing the students with general skills to use the computer and to help them understand and use the weblog. After registration, students exchanged their weblog addresses with their teacher and the rest of the participants. The students were instructed to be attentive to comment on their classmates' posts. It was explained to them that making weblogs would be a part of their overall course assessment and that it would make up 50% of their final grades. It was an out-of-class activity that the students did on their own page. They were made aware that the instructor would be reading their weblogs. In addition, the students were also told that they could refer to the instructor if they encountered any problems with their weblogs.

After teaching lesson one in the class, as an assignment the teacher got the students to write sentences about jobs in their weblogs and to comment on their classmates' posts. The other seven lessons were taught in this way and after each session, the students were asked to make sentences with the vocabulary they had learned, and to post them on their weblogs.

The teacher acted as a facilitator, and she checked all posts and comments. If students wrote sentences incorrectly, the teacher gave them feedback, she mentioned them in a comment.

#### IV. RESULTS

Table 1 shows Leven's test of equality of error variances. As it can be seen ,because of the sig we can say that the assumption is not met. In other words, making weblogs has not a significant effect on male in comparison with female's vocabulary development ; therefore the research hypothesis is rejected.

##### A. Descriptive Statistics

**Table 1: Levene's of Equality of Error Variance**

F	df1	df2	Sig.
4.325	1	29	.055

##### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Post

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	f	Mean Square		Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	42.460 <sup>a</sup>		14.153	6.276	.000	.790
Intercept	46.365		46.365	3.318	.000	.804
Gender	1.816		1.816	.089	.172	.138
Pre	30.036		30.036	4.540	.000	.727
Gender * Pre	2.261		2.261	.600	.131	.167
Error	11.305	3	.870			
Total	5035.000	7				
Corrected Total	53.765	6				

a. R Squared = .790 (Adjusted R Squared = .741)

One of the other assumptions of covariance analysis is the equality of regression lines for this group. This assumption is investigated and shown in Table 2 illustrated above.

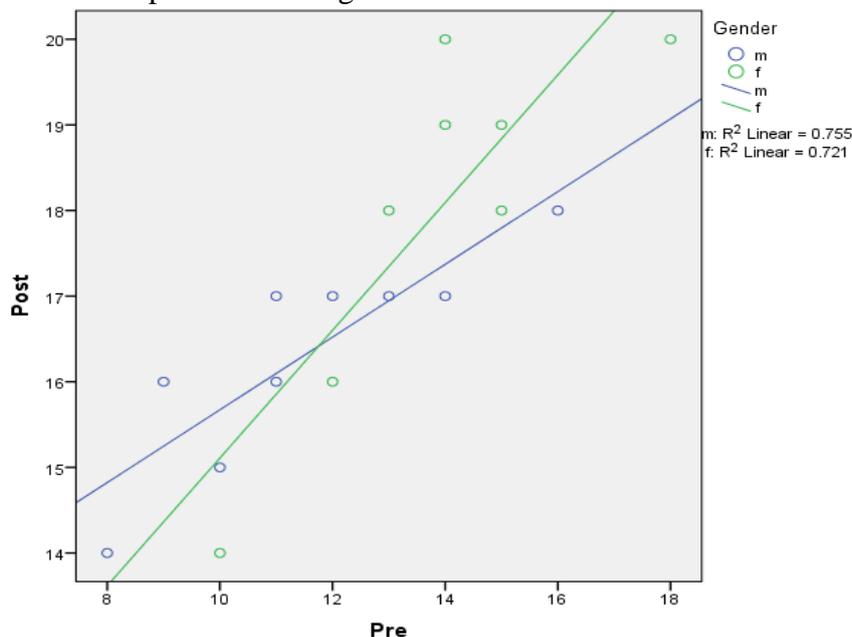


Figure 1 also indicates that there isn't any significant difference between male and female for learning vocabulary through making weblogs.

## V. CONCLUSION

Blogging increases students' interest, motivation and confidence. Interestingly, students' awareness of a „real“ audience with weblogs being publicly accessible encouraged them to monitor their writing. In conclusion, weblogs can provide an exciting and motivating learning environment where students have a sense of ownership and readership. Weblogs can be used to create social interactions between students and the instructor, students and their peers, and students and a global audience.

Blogs are recommended to foster students' English language development in a genuine learning environment.

The following points could be taken as the advantages of weblogs in teaching vocabulary. Using weblogs could help learners:

1. To read each other's posts.
2. To interact and comment on each other's posts by challenging each other's thoughts and views.
3. To write posts in response to each other's posts.
4. To increase the sense of community in a class. Making weblogs can help foster a feeling of community between the members of a class, especially if learners are sharing information about their interests, and are responding to what other students are writing.

5. To encourage shy students to participate. There is evidence to suggest that students who are quiet in class can find their voice when given the opportunity to express themselves in a blog.
6. To have an online portfolio of the students' written work. There is much to be gained from students keeping a portfolio of their work. One example is the ease at which learners can return to previous written work and evaluate the progress they have made during a course.
7. To help build a closer relationship in large classes. Sometimes students in large classes can spend all year studying with the same people without getting to know them well. A blog is another tool that can help bring students together.

Making weblogs offered a useful learning environment that gave the students a chance to create a strong sense of community in which they could participate actively while learning. Most importantly, they could practice the language, in an authentic learning environment. Students often learn as much from each other as from instructors or textbooks but making weblogs offers another mechanism for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and acquisition. They also learned from their peers and themselves; thus this promoted self-learning. Self-learning signals students' ability to be independent and thus become their own „player“ in the learning process. Bloggers in language learning created better postings and attracted new readers. Using blogs to support student learning was very successful. The students improved their grammar editing skills, showed an increase in motivation and became more autonomous learners. Clearly, blogs could be a very useful and adaptable learning aid that promoted 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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