

VOICE BLOG: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

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This study uses voice blogs as a platform for an extensive study of language learners' speaking skills. To triangulate the findings, the study collected data by surveying the learners' blogging processes, investigating learning strategies, and conducting retrospective interviews. The results revealed that students (a) developed a series of blogging stages, including conceptualizing, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, and evaluating, and used a wide variety of strategies to cope with blogging-related difficulties, and (b) perceived blogging as a means of learning, self-presentation, information exchange, and social networking. Findings suggest that blogs can constitute a dynamic forum that fosters extensive practice, learning motivation, authorship, and development of learning strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) typically involves two dimensions: time (synchronous or asynchronous) and modality (textual or spoken) (Hubbard, 2004; Warschauer, 2001). The text-based CMC involves email, online discussion forums, online chat rooms, and other text on the Internet, whereas the spoken form includes voicemail and email with attached voice recordings (Fotos & Browne, 2004; Hubbard, 2004; Meskill & Ranglova, 2000; Warschauer, 2001). Research has shown that CMC motivates learners to engage in meaningful communication in the target language and leads to effective language learning (Brown, 1994; Hanson-Smith, 2001; Meskill & Ranglova, 2000). It shifts learning from a teacher-centered toward a learner-centered approach, allowing learners to take control of learning content and learning process (Fotos & Browne, 2004).

Studies indicate that a well-designed CMC activity can encourage students to notice and modify output content and structure, enhance motivation, reduce anxiety, foster learner autonomy, and promote cooperative learning (Beauvois, 1992, 1998; Godwin-Jones, 2003; González-Bueno, 1998; Kern, 1995; Pellettieri, 2000; Shield & Weininger, 1999). Furthermore, by reducing social-context clues such as gender, race, and status, and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, CMC provides a safer and more relaxed environment for language learners, especially for the shy or less confident ones (Hanson-Smith, 2001; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). CMC also enables individuals to express their thoughts at their own pace and in their own space so that, in contrast to traditional classroom settings, CMC learners do not have to compete with their classmates for the instructor's attention (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991).

One of the best-received features of the Web 2.0 era is blogging. Blogs, also called weblogs, have fundamentally changed the way people use and interact on the Internet, by changing users from consumers to contributors of information. Blogs are easily created and easily updateable Web sites that enable authors with no knowledge of HTML to become instant publishers on the Internet. While traditional Web sites that feature hyperlinks and reflect the Web site developers' content-related priorities and usually contain a static, limited scope of content, blogs with Really Simple Syndication (RSS) present readers with diverse ideas, questions, and links and, thereby, help develop collective intelligence (Richardson, 2006; Warlick, 2005).

Blogs have been well received in education owing to their multimedia features, interactivity, and ability to support cooperative and autonomous learning. The strong interconnectedness between bloggers and readers makes blogs a powerful tool for global conversation. Bloggers can read other blogs, link to them, and reference them in their own blogs. The worldwide blog audience enables students to interact with and have their work viewed by others outside the classroom (Campbell, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2003;

Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Richardson, 2006; Warlick, 2005).

Several studies have lent support to the assertion that blogs can effectively facilitate language teaching and learning (Betts & Glogoff, 2005; Bloch, 2007), especially in terms of learners' language complexity, grammatical correctness, and fluency (Hewett, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000). In addition, bloggers tend to have a greater sense of freedom to express their ideas and to make their arguments than do classroom-based participants (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Bloch, 2004). Blogs enhance users' exposure to other people of different backgrounds and circumstances (Baggetun & Watson, 2006; Richardson, 2006). The archiving of blog entries facilitates users' reflection on blog content and fosters development of metacognitive strategies for monitoring the progress of learning on the blog (Richardson, 2006; Xie & Sharma, 2004). Through blogging, students take ownership of the virtual space and the work they publish—an outcome that replaces traditional acts of passive information consumption by acts of active information creation (Baggetun & Watson, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Richardson, 2006; Warlick, 2005).

One common difficulty that foreign-language students encounter is a severe lack of opportunities to put the language knowledge they have acquired into practice in authentic environments (Ho, 2003). For most students, speaking practice in the target language is usually limited to a conversation course. However, owing to large class sizes and limited class time, students tend to have few opportunities to practice speaking. The availability of blogs has created additional opportunities for oral practice.

Research on the effect of blogs on education is still in its infancy, and even less has been explored on the effect of blogs on language learning and teaching. The purpose of this study is to report on the integration of class blogs into L2 speaking courses and to examine (a) the effect of blogs on participants' learning processes and learning strategies, and (b) the participants' perception of the learning experiences afforded by blogs.

This study aims to provide a theoretical and a pedagogical foundation for the premise that extensive practice on blogs can constitute an integral part of instruction, and that blogs enable students to structure their thoughts and to make them publicly available in a way that is rarely possible in other media. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the learners' learning processes and learning strategies in voice-blog activities?
2. What emerging themes characterize perceptions of participants' blogging experiences?

METHODOLOGY

The study used two data collection procedures: (a) a survey of student attitudes towards the use of voice blogs, and (b) retrospective interviews with students.

Participants

The participants were 46 college students in Taiwan in two oral communication classes taught by the teacher-researcher. Both classes were relatively large: 24 and 22 students respectively. Of the 46 students, 15 were female and 31 were male. The students' average age was 20.67 years. One student was a freshman, 14 were sophomores, 8 were juniors, 22 were seniors, and 1 was a graduate student. The participants had been studying English as a foreign language for about 9 years, and most of them had never studied abroad in an English-speaking country. They were majoring in a variety of technical disciplines, such as electronic and mechanical engineering, information management science, and electrophysics. These students tended to have relatively little exposure to English in their content-based classes.

The objective of the course was to enhance students' oral proficiency in English by providing them with opportunities to practice speaking and to enhance their public presentation skills. The course included lectures on public speaking, video demonstrations of speech delivery, in-class discussions, and role-

playing. Students were expected to complete speaking assignments and to visit a local Toastmasters club (<http://www.toastmasters.org>). They were also required to submit an observation report. Classes met for two hours weekly. The function of the first hour was to develop public-speaking skills and to focus on book reviews. The function of the second hour was to provide students with hands-on experience regarding such practices in public presentation, feedback dissemination, and organization of meetings. Because the two classes were relatively large, students did not have sufficient opportunities to practice their oral skills in class. Voice blogs, therefore, served as an add-on component that afforded students additional opportunities for oral practice.

Class Blogs

The teacher-researcher chose to set up one blog for each course rather than have the students set up their own blogs because sharing one space increases the likelihood of classmates listening to and interacting with each other (Bloch, 2007). Moreover, the presence of the two class blogs increases the likelihood of the students in the two courses interacting with one another and thus gaining access to a wider audience than they would have been able to in a traditional speaking class. The class blogs were open to the public outside the school so that anyone could listen to the blogs and post comments.

The teacher-researcher developed a voice blog that served as a platform to which students could upload their posts. The blog included interfaces for both students and teachers. For the student interface, the blog was a user-friendly online place to keep oral diaries. In addition to some basic file-uploading tools and a calendar, the blog provided data-management functions, such as ability to sort all posts according to their popularity (measured in terms of number of clicks), date, names of bloggers, number of blog entries, number of responses to others' blog entries, and RSS setting. Bloggers were able to track their own blog history and had easy access to their classmates' blogs.

For the teacher interface, the class blog tracked each student's post history and displayed all the profiles and the data in an online spreadsheet according to various sorting methods based on, for example, student ID number, date of post, and total number of entries (see Figure 1). Each blogger had a separate space within the blog. Each space included the blogger's biographical information, photo, and brief written self-introduction. The space also included a personal calendar that enabled others to check not only how active the blogger was but also the archived titles of past blog entries (see Figure 2). Bloggers could find information in the archives most relevant to their interests by searching by student names, ID numbers, or keywords in the blog titles. When students uploaded a blog entry, they could decide whether to upload one or more images to accompany that particular blog.

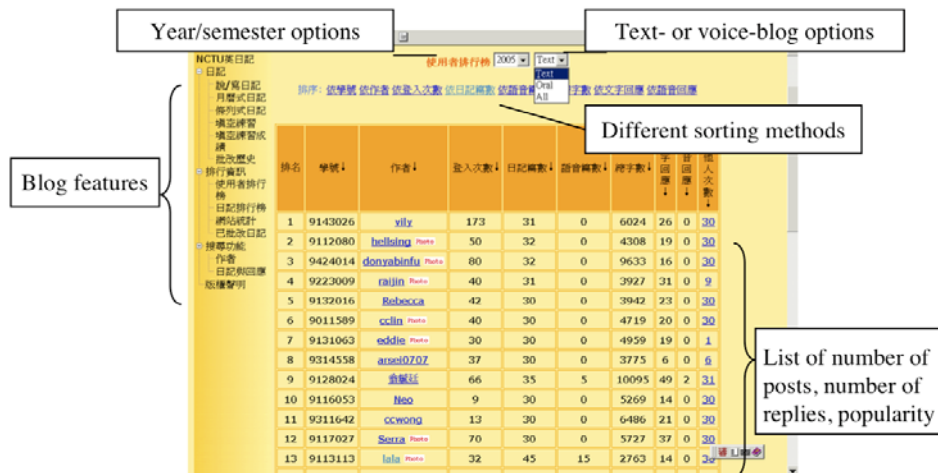


Figure 1. Screenshot of lists of all class voice bloggers' entries

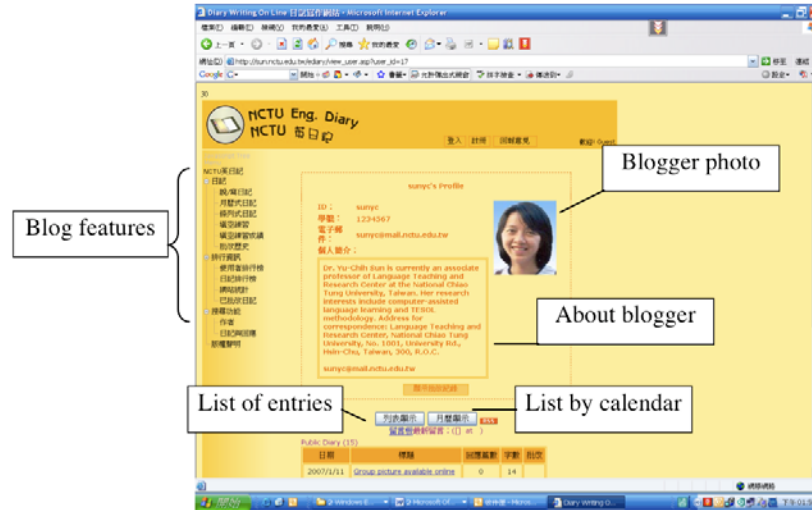


Figure 2. Screenshot of an individual blogger space

Procedures

The teacher-researcher described and illustrated the functions of the class voice blog during the first class meeting. Each student was required to log into the Web site during the first week of the class. Students had to upload 15 voice-blog entries and 5 voice responses to classmates' blog entries by the mid-term week and by the final-exam week, i.e., a total of 30 voice-blog and 10 response entries. The teacher-researcher explained to the students that the blog activity was mainly an out-of-class opportunity for additional, extensive speaking practice and tried to make the blog experience informal, personal, and exploratory by allowing students to determine what they wanted to say and when and how they wanted to say it. Neither formal instruction about how to prepare a voice-blog post, nor a list of expectations regarding how to achieve a good quality voice-blog post were offered.

The following excerpts are transcribed examples of voice-blogs that represent four purposes of blogging based on content analysis and categorization of students' blog posts. Language errors in the posts have not been edited.

Enhancement of oral-communication skills

Title: I love this class

Hello, everyone. I'm Ben. At the beginning of this semester, I was in a dilemma, whether I should take this class or not. After a struggle, I decide to take this class as a, as a challenge in the last semester of my college life as a student. I'm, at first, I was a-, afraid of being on the stage, uh, to give a speech in public because of my poor English. And I cannot express myself very well, even in Chinese, not, not to say in English. I feel nervous if, if a, somebody will, uh, be unsatisfied with my performance and laugh at me and pick out my faults. But during the, during the whole semester, I found everybody was so kind and would encourage others to speak English, to express their thought, their own story. Um, I really appreciate it. Um, because of this, I found learning English could be very fun. . . . As the teacher said, at, uh, this semester's end, but it should be the step stone of your learning travel. And I should work hard and learn English, be confident with myself, and I, I have to say that, uh, learning English is very fun.

Self-presentation

Title: Lifu, a dog friend of mine

Lifu is a dog in my neighborhood. She's a girl. She's one year. I first met her last December. She was very skinny, and I, and I'm scared. I've never seen a dog so skinny before. I just couldn't touch her. But now, she grows up and becomes healthier, stronger. Every time I go out, I hope to see her, so I can play with her. She'll sit down in front of me and let me touch her. She's very quiet. Just let me touch her. Scientist say that if a dog is sitting in front of you and being very quiet, it means that the dog is making friends with you and being the body guard for you. I'm happy that Lifu trust me, and now we are friends anyway.

Information exchange

Title: Can you keep a secret?

I read an English novel. It is called *Can You Keep a Secret?* I noticed this book because its cover. Its cover color is purple and the title is pink, pink, so I check this book out from our school's library. It is a story about a woman who doesn't feel satisfied with her life at all. She thinks her life sucks and everything is not going well. Until one day, she met a man on the plane. They came across an air disturbance, so the woman thinks that she's going to die. She can't help telling the man who sits beside her everything in her life, every her little secret. It is an interesting story, and the books also makes me think about an question. Can woman, can a woman tell her lover everything in her life? I think everyone can think about it.

Social networking

Title: Coward boy

I think I am a shy boy. Every time, I can't catch the opportunities. The most important reason is that I don't have much courage. For example, sometimes, the teacher ask every classmates some questions and invite someone who know the answer to share it. I knew the answer, but I dare not to raise my hand. Another example, if I like a girl very much, I have no courage to tell her. What I dare to do is to care for her at a distance. I'm really a coward boy. Okay, in the end, if anyone want to make a friend with me, you can call dorm phone, five-five-six-six. I'm very pleasure.

Survey Instrument

The researcher developed a voice-blog survey that consisted of a 45-item, five-point Likert scale (see [Appendix](#)). It included three subcategories: (a) learners' perceived gains in speaking skills (7 items), (b) self-reported learning processes and learning strategies (18 items), and (c) the learners' attitudes toward the class blog (20 items). Participants were asked to rate their agreement on the scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

[Table 1](#) presents the subscales of the survey. The survey questions were presented in the students' first language (Chinese) to ensure that they understood the questions. The survey was administered at the end of the semester.

Table 1. Subscales of the Voice-Blog Survey

Subscale	Description
Helpfulness (Questions 1-7)	Improvement in general oral, public-speaking, and language skills, such as fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary
Bloggng processes and blogging strategies (Questions 8-25)	Average time spent on each blog post, frequency of rehearsal, script writing, responding to others' comments, and editing
Attitude (Questions 26-45)	Blog-technology acceptance, perceived degree of motivation and confidence, and concern about the comprehensibility, quality, interest level, and popularity of blogs

Interviews

To gain a broad perspective on student's blogging processes, the teacher-researcher interviewed a variety of participants. The present study adopted stratified sampling to "ensure the representative presence of particular subgroups of the population under study" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 120). An initial pool of 12 students was selected. The characteristics taken into consideration were gender, major, year of study, blog performance, and course grade. These specific characteristics were taken into consideration as they are commonly identified in studies as important demographic information. A sample drawn from such an informed selection is believed to be more representative than a random sample, particularly because of the limited sample size.

Of the 12 students invited to participate in the interviews, 10 agreed to do so. The teacher-researcher chose 6 of them to interview. Again, this selection was made to include as wide a variety of student characteristics as possible so that their comments can be as representative and generalizable as possible. Of the 6 interview participants, 2 were female and the other 4 were male; 2 were sophomores, 2 were juniors, and 2 were seniors. Each came from a different field of study (electronic and civil engineering, electrophysics, industrial-engineering management, materials science, and transportation technology and management). Their blog performance and in-class performance vary to some extent. The interviews were conducted individually in Chinese, the students' first language, which allowed them to express their ideas fluently and fully. All of the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim in Chinese for further analysis. Each interview lasted about one hour. The rationale for the interview questions was to gather information relating to four major areas: (a) students' learning processes in relation to the blogs, (b) related learning strategies, (c) difficulties encountered, and (d) solutions to those difficulties.

RESULTS

Over the course of a semester (18 weeks), the 46 participants uploaded a total of 1,239 voice-blog entries and 646 comments on their classmates' blog entries. On average, each participant posted 27 voice blogs and 14 comments on the class blog over the course of one semester.

Research question 1: What are the learners' learning processes and learning strategies?

Time

The results of the survey indicate that the self-reported average time that each participant spent creating a voice-blog entry ranged widely (See Table 2). On average, each student spent approximately 209–1,254 minutes in total working on the blogs over the course of the semester.

Table 2. Average Time Spent on Creating a Voice-Blog Entry

Time spent on each blog post	Percentage of students (%)
Fewer than 5 minutes	24
5-15 minutes	31
15-30	38
More than 30 minutes	7

Blogging stages

For the purpose of triangulating the findings, data was collected by surveying the learners' blogging processes, investigating learning strategies, and conducting retrospective interviews. The blogging stages which emerged are summarized in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Identified Blogging Stages and Strategies

Blogging Stages	Strategies
Conceptualizing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning what to say and how to say it 2. Coming up with an appropriate voice-blog topic 3. Listening to others' blogs for ideas 4. Consulting a dictionary or searching the Internet 5. Note-taking
Brainstorming	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outlining main and supporting ideas 2. Translating from Chinese to English 3. Writing down a script before recording
Articulation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rehearsing before recording 2. Recording voice blog and uploading it to the blog
Monitoring	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening to the recorded file before uploading it to the blog 2. Monitoring blog entries in terms of content, organization, and language usage
Evaluating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evaluating blog content, organization, and language-usage 2. Redoing the blogs

Conceptualizing

The first stage involved planning what to say and how to say it. One of the most frequently reported difficulties in the conceptualizing stage concerned the need to determine the content of the voice-blog. The results of the survey show that over 71% of the participants found it difficult to come up with an appropriate voice-blog topic due to topic-related language limitations. However, 49% of the participants reported that topic selection became easier with continual practice. Participants compensated for difficulties in topic selection by either selecting familiar themes or locating helpful resources. Below are some comments made by the participants:

1. It's difficult for me to talk about everyday events in English, so I tend to talk about something general, easy, and common, like sports, leisure activities, or the books I am reading.
2. If I am unsure about what to say, I'll listen to others' blogs to get some inspiration.
3. I hope to build an interesting blog, so I try to select special topics like the Bermuda Triangle mystery as attention-getters. To speak on the topic, I look for relevant online information and visit some Web sites. I also look up words in an electronic dictionary for Chinese-English or English-Chinese translations.

Comment 1 shows that blogs provide students with freedom of topic selection and, thus, allow them to talk about topics within their ability and of their interest. Comment 2 shows how a blog community can

enhance interaction and support among bloggers. Comment 3 shows how a blog community helps develop a sense of audience for the bloggers and encourages creation of blogs that are attractive and informative to the audience. The results of the interviews reveal that even though some students felt that they lacked a sufficient grasp of the language to express their thoughts, the asynchronous nature of voice blogging allowed them to search for needed information by consulting a dictionary or performing an Internet search.

Brainstorming

In addition to conceptualizing the blog topics, participants used a variety of brainstorming strategies for the spoken discourse. About 47% of them usually or always wrote down the script before recording it. As one student stated:

4. I plan ahead for things I would like to talk about. Then I outline the main points in English, check grammar rules, and rehearse about five times. I don't record the voice blog until I'm quite familiar with the content because I can't tolerate myself making too many unnecessary utterances such as "well." I'm also afraid that I'll suffer from incoherence, which makes the listener impatient.
5. I usually plan what I want to say in Chinese first, and then translate it into English, and then say it in English. Although I still make pauses at times, things are getting better.

Articulation

55% of the students rehearsed several times before recording. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate how participants prepared for the blogs:

6. I try to practice speaking several times before the speech sounds fluent enough.
7. I usually rehearse five to six times for each blog post.

Monitoring

Most participants used extensive monitoring strategies to enhance the quality of their blog entries. 56% usually or always listened to the recorded file before uploading it to the blog. They expressed a number of concerns involving pronunciation, grammar, and fluency:

8. I plan ahead for the content and word choices. Then I consult a dictionary to make sure that the word usage is correct.
9. I usually listen to the recorded file again before it's uploaded.

Evaluating

After uploading the entries to the blog, participants used evaluating strategies to either redo or edit part of the entries:

10. The probability that I'll redo a blog is about 80%. Sometimes, some grammatical errors in a blog post may suddenly come to my mind several days after I finished recording the blog; then I'll go back to the blog and redo it.
11. I redo the blog entries mostly because of grammatical errors, unnecessary pauses, or fluency problems. I spend about 40 minutes on average for each blog post.

Students not only viewed blogging as a means that allowed them to share thoughts and feelings with others on the Internet, but one which also allowed them to focus on both meaning and form. They generally used a wide variety of strategies to create their blog entries, from early conceptualizing, topic brainstorming, and compensating for insufficient language skills to rehearsing, monitoring, and evaluating.

The blogging stages and strategies above are represented in [Figure 3](#). Conceptualization involves planning the blog content, acquiring knowledge about the topic, and acquiring knowledge about the pattern of discourse. Brainstorming refers to drills, word and phrase searches that facilitate both the expression of meanings and the sequence of utterances. Articulation involves rehearsing and recording one's blog entries. Monitoring means checking both the linguistic quality and content of utterances. Evaluating involves identifying mistakes and self-correcting them. As revealed in the interviews, these processes are recursive, i.e., students tend to shift back and forth among the different stages. By encouraging students to take authorship of their entries, blog-based publishing can lead students to make greater strategic effort to improve the quality of their learning outcomes (Richardson, 2006).

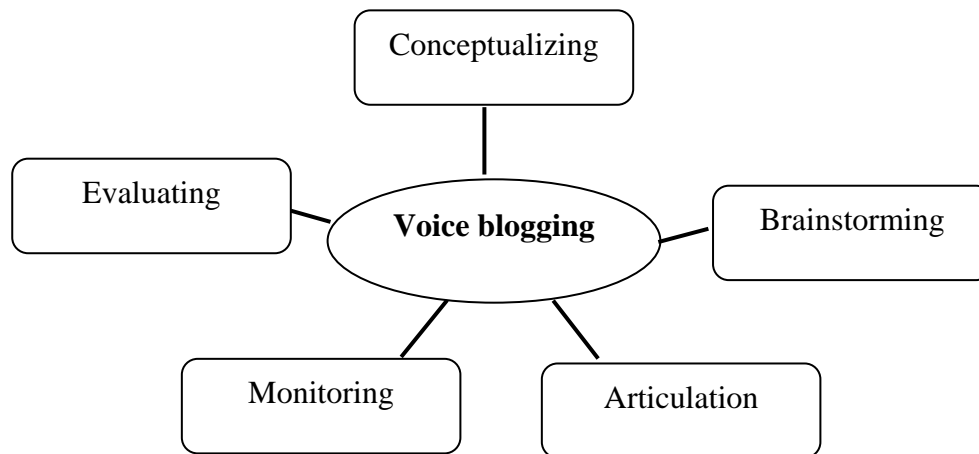


Figure 3. Framework of class voice blogging

Research question 2: What emerging themes characterize perceptions of participants' blogging experiences?

Blog activities

Participant responses to questions about interest in blogging are summarized in [Table 4](#).

Table 4. Responses to Interest in Blog Activities (based on survey questions 28, 29, and 31 in the [Appendix](#))

Interest in blog activities	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Listening to others' blogs	4.4	8.9	33.3	40.0	13.3
Replying to comments	6.7	11.1	40.0	33.3	8.9
Recording blog entries	4.4	15.6	48.9	20.0	11.1

The following excerpts show the self-perceived effect of students listening to others' blogs:

12. By listening to others' voice blogs, I come to notice my weaknesses in speaking and to learn about different ways to express myself.
13. I think that the requirements for responding to others' blog entries should be greater because I think that I benefit more from listening to others' blogs than from recording mine. The amount of posting and of responding should be at least equivalent. Listening to others' blogs can help us compare and contrast our own blogs with others' blogs, a process that is really helpful.

Participants' perceptions of usefulness of blogs

The participants' perceptions of usefulness of blogs are outlined in Table 5. Of the perceived benefits of blogging, speaking skills received the highest score (M=3.51), followed by self-expression (M=3.51), information exchange (M=3.31), and social networking (M=3.02). In general, the results show that the participants prioritized the enhancement of oral-communication skills.

Table 5. Purposes Relative to Voice-Blog Technology (based on survey questions 32-35 in the Appendix)

Purposes of blogging	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Enhancement of oral-communication skills	2.2	2.2	24.4	55.6	15.6
Self-presentation	2.2	4.4	40.0	46.7	6.7
Chances for information exchanges	2.2	13.3	44.4	31.1	8.9
A new way of social networking	6.7	22.2	37.8	28.9	4.4

The following excerpts illustrate students' perceptions of blogs as learning tools:

14. I seldom speak or think in English. Speaking on a voice blog increases the opportunities for me to speak English and to provide oral feedback to peers. It really helps me reduce speaking anxiety.
15. Voice blogs are helpful because they promote speaking among people like me who don't speak English on a regular basis. Unlike the classroom environment, blogs make me feel relaxed and thus help me speak more fluently. I feel that I perform better on the voice blog than in face-to-face situations. My listening ability has also improved owing to the requirement that we respond to others' blog entries.

Time management

Most students worked harder on their voice blogs at the beginning than they did by the end of the semester. Moreover, many indicated that they did not spread out their blog practice throughout the semester evenly. Half of them put off completing the blog assignments till the last few days before the deadline during the week of the finals. The following excerpts are of interest in this regard:

16. I spread out the blog recordings on a regular basis before the midterm: one blog at a time. But after the midterm, I recorded them all, about ten blogs, at a time. I learned more from the spread-out mode of practice because it's hard to be well prepared when I record the entire required amount in a single sitting.
17. I recorded all fifteen of the required blogs within one day (from early morning till midnight) during finals because I always have a hectic schedule at that time of the semester. Recording on a daily basis is more helpful to me than recording all at once. But it's more time efficient to record the blog entries all at once.

As indicated in comments 14 and 15, the students seemed to realize that regular, evenly distributed postings on the blog yielded greater benefits than did irregular, unevenly distributed ones. The regularity of students' blogging, students' time-management practices, and students' motivation became factors that determined the effectiveness of students' blog activities. As Barr (2004) noted, students do not always engage in self-directed e-learning efficiently. This is not necessarily due to student opposition to self-directed learning. Rather, they may lack the necessary time for it. Therefore, time availability for learners' e-learning is an important pedagogical issue:

18. The voice blog was fun in the beginning, but later, it wasn't interesting. During finals week, it got even worse.
19. At first, it was awkward for me to speak into the machine. At first, the recording process and the posting process (which involved photos of myself, as well as audio clips) were burdens for me, but later, it turned out to be an interesting and special learning experience.
20. I felt annoyed at the very beginning because it was something new and I wasn't in the habit of keeping a diary myself, not to mention one in English and in oral form. But the more I practiced, the more I became fluent while speaking on the voice blog.

Concern about popularity

Students exhibited various degrees of concern about the popularity of their blogs. As indicated by the following excerpts, some students were unconcerned, whereas others tried to boost their popularity indices. Some students exhibited disappointment when their actual popularity failed to meet their expectations:

21. I'm busy, so I seldom work on the popularity of my blog by doing things like posting photos.
22. In the very beginning, I cared about how many people visited my blog. But when I realized that the number always fell short of my expectations, I stopped caring about it. It's exciting to notice that more than 200 people have visited my blog. When the number of clicks fell to between 20 and 200, I no longer felt any excitement. And when it fell below 23, I felt that nobody cared about my blog.

To boost the popularity index, participants made the following suggestions:

- Make the blog indispensable for many people by posting valuable information, such as test-preparation tips or test banks.
- Make the blog more dynamic by inviting guest speakers and international students on campus to post on the blog, advertise the class blog on a search engine such as Google or Yahoo or on the university's homepage.
- Open a discussion forum on the blog about issues of common interest, such as study and travel abroad, or advice on business start-up.

DISCUSSION

Willis and Willis (2001) showed that to achieve satisfactory efficiency in learning a foreign language, a balance between meaning and attention to form must be found. Student strategies as revealed in this study indicate the complex nature of students' struggle with meaning, attention to form, and fluency of language production. How to help students find an appropriate balance is, therefore, an important pedagogical issue (Barr, 2004).

A possible explanation for students' perception of improvement, whether real or imagined, especially in fluency, is that the blog's speaking environment, where freedom and safety were paramount, encourage students to take risks with the target language and to emphasize content over form, which resulted in a sense of improved fluency. In addition, the task-based nature of blogging promotes authentic and purposeful language use, with the form playing a secondary role (Skehan, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2001). This also aids students' fluency development.

In the current study, some participants recorded their blogs all at once rather than spacing them out evenly throughout the semester. One consequence of a last-minute rush could be a significant diminution of the quality and quantity of the blogs. Students would either make shorter entries near the end of the semester

just to get enough entries done or they would spend less time on rehearsal and practice before making actual recordings.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study reveal that students went through a series of blogging stages, including conceptualizing, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, and evaluating, and used a wide variety of strategies to cope with blogging-related difficulties. In addition, students perceived blogging not only as a means of learning, but also as a means of self-presentation, information exchange, and social networking. Furthermore, the findings suggest that blogs constitute a dynamic forum that fosters extensive practice, learning motivation, authorship, and development of learning strategies.

Pedagogical relevance is an important driving force that can both motivate students to undertake an activity and maintain their interest in it (Barr, 2004). Students in language courses would be more likely to engage in blogging if they felt that maintaining a regular target language blog could enhance their language proficiency or that improved blog-based performance could improve their course grade. Whatever the case, educators should make informed decisions regarding the extent of integration of blogs with course content, for instance, should the blogs be central or a peripheral component of the course? Course design should take into account many blog-related issues. One such issue concerns whether teachers should assign specific topics to be addressed on blogs. Further research in this regard would be of interest to researchers and classroom teachers.

Finding a balance between meaning and form is another important issue in integrating blogs more fully into course content. The need to focus on form may vary depending on course objectives and task design. If the main purpose of blogging is to enhance self-confidence (that is, to reduce speaking anxiety), then educators should provide students with opportunities for free language exchanges. On the other hand, if the main purpose of blogging is to enhance awareness of form, teachers should encourage students to observe and to reflect on language use in their own and in others' blogs.

One of the limitations of the current study is that classroom-based blogging tends to have a limited audience. Participants in the study expressed their interest in having not only a greater number but also a greater variety of visitors to their blogs, not just classmates. They also expressed interest in interacting with native speakers of English. Future research could compare classroom-based blogging and 'real-world' blogging and examine its effect on language learning, learner attitudes, and interaction among bloggers.

Research on the possible contributions of blogs to language learning is still in its infancy. More research can help determine whether other factors such as gender, age, field of study, computer literacy, and learner personality have a significant effect on the blogging process. Moreover, studies comparing blog entries with classroom discourse could shed light on communication patterns in the blogosphere. Other questions that are not addressed in this study merit attention: Is speaking on a voice blog as anxiety-provoking as speaking to an audience face-to-face? Can students who are speaking on a voice blog develop similar sense of audience as they would when speaking to a group face-to-face? Finally, it would be useful to compare the advantages and disadvantages of educational blogs with other CMC and face-to-face communication. More research on different task types of blogging could clarify aspects of student blogging and help create better pedagogical approaches for various instructional purposes. Combining mobile devices with blogs might serve as another strategy that, by fostering "anywhere, anytime" learning, could render blogging more time-efficient (Geddes, 2004).

APPENDIX: Voice-Blog Survey

Section one: Please respond to the following statements by rating your agreement on the scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

1. Voice blog is helpful in improving my general oral skills.
2. Voice blog is helpful in improving my public-speaking skills.
3. Voice blog is helpful in improving my oral fluency.
4. Voice blog is helpful in improving my pronunciation.
5. Voice blog is helpful in improving my grammar accuracy.
6. Voice blog is helpful in improving my vocabulary accuracy.
7. Voice blog is helpful in improving my idea-organization skills.

Section two: Please respond to the following statements by rating your agreement on the scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = usually, 5 = always).

8. I rehearse before recording the audio files.
9. I listen to the recorded files before uploading them to the blog.
10. I write down what I want to talk about before recording them.
11. I visit others' blogs to get some useful ideas.
12. I respond to the comments received on my blog.
13. It is difficult for me to identify topics to discuss on voice blog.
14. The length of time that I spend on thinking about discussion-worthy topics decreases over time.
15. When I don't know what to talk about on voice blog, I search for information from various sources.
16. I choose topics that are easier to express.
17. When I record a voice blog, I feel like I am talking to someone.
18. I have mentioned my blog to someone I know.
19. I redo the voice-blog entries when the speech does not flow well.
20. I redo the voice-blog entries when the intonation does not sound right.
21. I redo the voice-blog entries when there are grammatical mistakes on it.
22. I redo the voice-blog entries when the word choice is not quite right.
23. I redo the voice-blog entries when the pronunciation does not sound right.
24. I redo the voice-blog entries when the organization of ideas is not right.
25. I update my blog on a regular basis.

Section three: Please respond to the following statements by rating your agreement on the scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

26. Voice blogging is an interesting activity.
27. I expect myself to update my voice blog frequently.
28. Listening to my classmates' voice-blog entries is interesting.
29. Responding to my classmates' voice-blog entries is interesting.
30. Overall, I am satisfied with my performance on voice blog.
31. Recording on voice blog is interesting.
32. Voice blog provides opportunities for social interaction online.
33. Voice blog provides opportunities for enhancing my oral-proficiency skills.
34. Voice blog provides opportunities for self-presentation by enabling the user to express him- or herself.
35. Voice blog provides opportunities for exchanging information.
36. Voice blog enhances my confidence in speaking in English.
37. I am pleased when others leave a message on my blog.
38. I feel motivated by listening to classmates' voice blogs.

39. I care about how people view my voice blog.
 40. I care about how many people visit my blog.
 41. I care about whether or not people understand my blog entries.
 42. I care about the quality of my blog entries.
 43. I care about whether or not the content of my blog is interesting to others.
 44. I care about whether or not the content of my blog is informative.
 45. Interacting with native speakers on my blog can help me improve my English.
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