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Online Blogs in the Process of Development of Students' Reading Skills

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Abstract

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The purpose of the study is to identify the conditions and ways of effective use of online blogs during the process of English language training of students at the university. Analyzing blogs in the context of their didactic problems, synthesis of information obtained in the study of effective educational Internet resources, the effectiveness of blogs, and taking into consideration all the pros and cons of analyzed resources we tested the layout of the tutor blog network for the development of students' reading skills in English classes with a combination of full-time and distance learning. The work in the field of blogs helps to increase students' motivation to learn English. This research serves as a starting point for more in-depth study of application of on-line blogs in the students' learning process of reading skills development, taking into account cultural, age and gender features of the members of the experimental and control groups.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays Russia witnesses the formation of the new educational system oriented to the world information and education environment. Thus, the pedagogical theory and practice of educational process are subject to dramatic changes that imply making certain adjustments to what is meant by

“teaching technologies” which are supposed to be adequate to modern technical solutions. Computer technologies are bound to be integral part of common educational process and to significantly increase its efficiency.

2. Problem statement

In contemporary process of teaching foreign languages information technologies are not duly used. Thus, not all computer resources are used to the full extent when teaching students with the help of computers at Universities.

With the advent and the development of the Internet “we now have a kind of united country connected by computer telecommunications, so to speak, the whole world with no borders (not from the geographical point of view, but in terms of concepts, subjects matters, culture” (Polat 2009, p. 162).

The Internet with its colossal information and no less impressive didactical potential should greatly contribute to:

- students’ individual cognitive activity;
- distance courses-based learning activity;
- educational process in and outside the classroom activities including the system of continuing education.

The main purpose of teaching foreign languages, English in particular, at universities is to form communicative competence, i.e. teaching students and developing their skills being involved in the Internet-based communication.

“The Internet is one of those phenomena which have emerged as a result of a development of a prominent new technology, currently considered as the latest technological innovation for second and foreign language education” (Kwiatkowska).

The communicative approach in the educational process suggests teaching foreign languages and developing students’ dexterity in cross-cultural communication. With Internet technologies used at a foreign language class we create the model of communication as it were in real life.

The necessity to use Internet resources in the learning environment is repeatedly underlined by a number of specialists in the sphere of methodology of teaching from Russia (P. Sysoyev, M. Yevsigneyev (2008); E. Polat (2009); Z. Devterova (2011); Yu. Vetrov (2012)), and from other countries (M. Warschauer, P. Whittaker (1997); N. Kokkas (1999); M. Iskander (2008); A. M. Harrington (2010); A. Kwiatkowska; W. Baker (2012); Jo McDonough (2013) etc.).

For instance, I. Brown (1999) says: “The World Wide Web” can be considered “as the largest library in the world, with Web sites the equivalents of books, full of information in English on almost any topic that can be imagined making it a vast storehouse of free and authentic materials for the ESL teacher to use”. A. Kwiatkowska insists: “The Internet in a language classroom, the much-needed source of information, at the same time becomes an important educational tool, which is to help students achieve their basic goal the command of a foreign language” (Kwiatkowska).

It should be mentioned that authentic Web-based materials also help students to an appreciation of different cultures around the world. Internet technologies (IT) offer many opportunities for students and teachers to experience using English with native speakers via e-mail, forums, teleconferences.

Web-bases resources, which are of interest to teachers, may be classified as follows:

- teaching resources
- methodical guidance
- historical and cultural information
- technical information
- works of fiction
- reference books

3. Research questions

Of considerable interest today is an on-line public diary or web-blog or blog. One of the authors of the book “*Internet-Based Language Learning: Pedagogies and Technologies*” (2009) A. Aim stresses the importance of web-blogs at foreign language classes (p.119-140). Leila Kajee in the book “*Constructing identities in online communities of practice: A case study of online learning*” (2008) researches options of on-line blog-based teaching.

Blogging, as a promising tool to develop skills to read specific issue-related on-line public diaries in a foreign language, fosters students’ educational activity as well as the cognitive one that should expand their horizon.

Blogging enables students to write their own diaries, with the information arranged in the reverse chronological order. Another advantage of the technology is the fact that it allows editing, changing, or update teaching material.

Nowadays, the most popular virtual environments among blogs in English are considered to be *blogger.com*; *Livejournal.com*; *blogspot.com*.

Due to the fact that people engaged in blogging are multicultural and responsive audience, the content of blogs is of authentic communicative character that helps break down barriers people feel when communicating in person. This technology is actively applied in higher school to control knowledge acquisition and organization of the educational process (curriculum planning, lesson planning, assignments guidance, teaching materials); to exchange opinions and doing consultancy work; to archive didactical and analytical materials; to provide practice material for after-classes activities, etc.

Web-blogs and their educational possibilities, though not used on a regular basis, attract the attention of more and more teachers. Blogs allows not only reading texts but also offering and executing changes, giving feedback and comments, placing hyperlinks to other web-resources thus directing students to discovery activities and promoting immediate creativity of their own.

4. Research methods

Having carried out a detailed analysis of prevailing educational blogs as well as the language for a blog content we developed the resource, the tutor blog – a kind of closed blog for teachers (<http://englishpfur.blogspot.ru/>) which was introduced into the educational process of students in their 1st and 2nd year in Institute of Foreign Languages, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia.

It is a well-known fact that texts should be carefully chosen in terms of their educational value, professionally-oriented contexts and accordance with the syllabus as well as preferences of students and their age. Moreover, teachers should bear in mind that a problem raised in a text may influence different people in a different way and lead to undesirable debates, which proves the significant role of teachers when preparing material for classes.

Taking into account the information mentioned above, we chose to study authentic texts of each type of reading.

Reading for detail – the problematic article "U.S. Extends Sanctions on Russia to 2017" – The Moscow Times (<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/us-extends-sanctions-on-russia-to-2017/561428.html>).

Scanning – the informative article "The Outrageous Fortune of Benedict Cumberbatch" – The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jul/26/benedict-cumberbatch-inside-story-hamlet-sherlock-school-actor>).

Exploratory reading – an extract from the book "Watching the English" by Kate Fox (p. 35-49).

Skimming – two types of essays on the educational topic – "Education Essay" (<http://www.indiacelebrating.com/essay/education/>).

Each text is followed by a series of exercises that contribute to the formation and improvement of reading skills. Students are expected to perform this type of work during extracurricular time using Internet connection. After reading the text students do tasks on-line, which is followed by their teacher's feedback in different ways: making comments or corrections or assessing the students' performance.

The first text (Text 1) to develop students' reading skills comprises a topical article "U.S. Extends Sanctions on Russia to 2017", published in "The Moscow Times". This article is of a polemical character and contemporary relevance. After working on the self-study material, students perform tasks that follow the text. In *Task 1* students are asked to make a brief summary of the article in 4-5 sentences. In *Task 2* students find the information which is important to understand the idea of the text. In *Task 3* they have to mark the sentences that could be omitted without the damage to the idea of the text. Students complete the task using the comments function, i.e. the user leaves a comment, which contains answers. Since our blog is of a closed type, only a blog administrator, namely the teacher, can receive comments to the publications, which eliminates the possibility of cheating.

The second text (Text 2) is aimed at training reading for specific information or scanning. For this purpose, we chose the informative article "The Outrageous Fortune of Benedict Cumberbatch", presented in "The Guardian". Benedict Cumberbatch is one of the most popular actors of our time, so the article devoted to his works should be of interest to a great number of students. To improve

scanning reading skills students deal with and answer the following tasks: *Task 1* – Which parts of the text fully disclose the main idea? *Task 2* – Name the awards won by Benedict Cumberbatch. *Task 3* – Find equivalents of the given words and phrases.

The third text (Text 3) presents an extract from Kate Fox's "Watching the English" (p. 35-49), first published in the UK in 2004. The book reveals the concept of national stereotypes, which should be of great importance for students studying foreign languages. The vocabulary in the book is appropriate for students with intermediate level of English. To develop exploratory reading skills we offer four other tasks: *Task 1* – Divide the text into parts and think of their headings. *Task 2* – Find the key words and phrases that could be used while discussing the content of the text. *Task 3* – Express your opinion on the topic stated in the text. *Task 4* – Make up 3 questions to the text (different types of questions).

To teach skimming reading skills we selected several essays on the subject of education published on the web-site www.indiacelebrating.com (*Text 4*). The essays raise the problem of modern education and offer good food for thought. Students are encouraged to perform two tasks, using the comments function. *Task 1* – Highlight the parts of the text which disclose the contents of the heading. *Task 2* – Look through the text. Decide whether the following questions are discussed in the text.

For clearer perception of the idea we have produced the following chart (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of reading and tasks to the given texts.

Types of reading	Text	Tasks to the text
Reading for detailed comprehension	topical article "U.S. Extends Sanctions on Russia to 2017"	TASK 1: Make a summary of the text. TASK 2: Find the information which is important to understand the idea of the text. TASK 3: Mark the sentences that could be omitted without the damage to the sense of the text.
Reading for specific information /Scanning	informative article "The Outrageous Fortune of Benedict Cumberbatch"	TASK 1: Which parts of the text fully disclose the main idea? TASK 2: Name the awards won by Benedict Cumberbatch. TASK 3: Find equivalents of the words and phrases: - be involved - conscientious - full house - work deliberately - lead a fast life - be ungrateful - dandy - grin
Exploratory reading	extract from Kate Fox's "Watching the English"	TASK 1: Divide the text into parts and think of their headings. TASK 2: Find the key words and phrases that could be used while discussing the content of the text. TASK 3: Express your opinion on the topic stated in the text. TASK 4: Make up 3 questions to the text (different types of questions)
Reading for gist /skimming	essay on the educational topic "Education Essay"	TASK 1: Highlight the parts of the text which disclose the contents of the heading. TASK 2: Look through the text. Decide whether the following questions are discussed in the text. a) education categories b) the description of Secondary and Higher Secondary education c) the rights of poor people to get educated d) the system of education in Russia e) the connection between the development of the country and the education standard of this country

5. Findings

Experimental learning was carried out with full-time and distance learning forms combined: the students were studying the language of their speciality along with their distant individual work on the base of the developed blog in the following forms:

- students' individual work;
- students' individual work with the help of the teacher in the format of virtual consultations.

After the experimental learning the students were offered the questionnaire to complete with "Yes" / "No" answers to the questions as follows:

1. Blogging has improved my reading skills.
2. My vocabulary has increased with the help of the work in the blog.
3. Blogging is a new kind of social network.
4. The instructions for tasks in blog are clear to me.
5. Other students can easily copy my work.

The questionnaire involved 15 students in their 1st and 2nd year in Institute of Foreign Languages, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia.

The results obtained from the questionnaire showed the students' enthusiasm and keen interest to the tasks (*see Figure 1*).

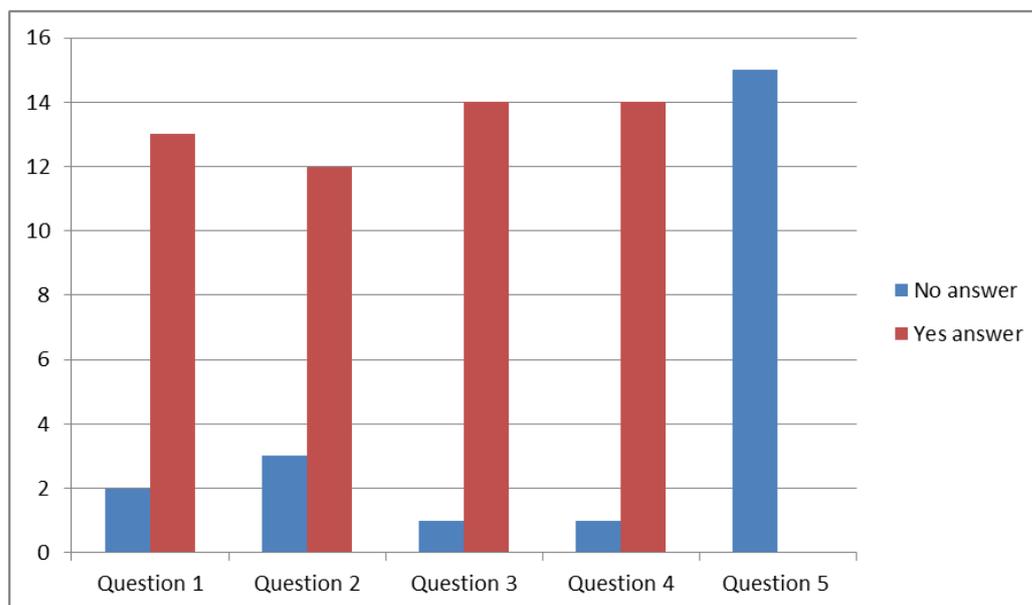


Fig. 1. The results of the questionnaire.

In the course of the training the students experienced significant progress in terminology acquisition, developing language and communicative competence. It proves that the experimental learning succeeded: as it had been expected the vast majority of students took a great interest in new forms of work, expressed their willingness to be engaged in a varied, independent activity. This allows us to talk about efficiency of the developed training model of the blog, which can be considered as part of an additional resource of English language training.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This article deals with the Internet resources such as blogs which possess rich methodical potential and can be fully adapted in the process of teaching foreign languages at universities in full-time or distance learning. The Internet today is the basis of computerized civilization, which has potential for expansion of communication and exchange of information between people. It is also the greatest source of inexhaustible supply of information the size and range of which often makes it difficult to search on the Internet for the exact information. Thus, we are suggesting teachers that they attach much importance to the choice of texts for reading in blogs. Such texts are expected to be:

- authentic-made or authentic-like to get students acquainted with different genres and culture-related information, diversified vocabulary and language construction;
- not too difficult for learners, otherwise they may lose all their motivation by reading what is hardly understood instead of feeling at ease and confident when reading;
- suitable for the teaching goal as any educational process is accompanied with the appropriate guidance concerning students' knowledge acquisition and developing skills at a certain level of a foreign language; in addition a teacher should take into consideration the students' interest in the topic in the text in case they may be unhappy to bring it to discuss.
- usable in the series of activities: students are involved in cognitive process, speculating on the message of a text, searching on the Web for relevant topics, comparing and contrasting various opinions on the topic in question, producing ideas by making comments in their blogs, etc.

To sum up, blogging is an interactive activity to revise, review, and improve students' reading skills in a rewarding and motivating way.

The approbation of the suggested model proved that blog environment helps increase and sustain students' motivation for learning English as well as teaches to make use of particular English-language web resources. As a promising and convenient methodological tool, the developed blog contributes to developing communicative skills and strategies that not only makes language learning a collective endeavor, which is of great advantage, but also promotes interaction in many cultures.

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