

Case Study 2 – Learning through blogging: a case study with business Spanish students at Reykjavik University

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1. Introduction

In a knowledge society where competence domains are widened and in rapid evolution, organisations are forced to move towards the so-called Web 2.0 model, characterised by an intensive use of blogs, wikis, social bookmarking and RSS. Web 2.0 and its development of social platforms have brought about a change in online communication. In this new social web, all of us create the content and interact with each other. “Communication” and “interaction” are the terms that best describe this new reality.

Communication is a fundamental part of learning. As instructors, we communicate with each other, as well as with our students, who also interact with us and with each other. It would be a waste therefore not to use these online communication tools and apply them to our learning contexts, especially in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language.

This case study reports on the experience of using a blog in the classroom as a learning and evaluation tool on a university level course with students of Spanish as a foreign language at Reykjavik University, Iceland.

According to Will Richardson (2006):

blogs are made of reflections and conversations updated every day (if not a couple of times a day). They engage readers with ideas and questions and links. They ask readers to think and to respond. They demand interaction. Blogs are a collaborative space, as readers become part of the writing and learning process.

The blog tasks and the contents were adapted to the course level from A2 to B2 (see the European Framework of Reference for Languages). My students were mainly business students but they also come from other faculties as law, computer science, engineering and health education and the syllabus is designed as a Spanish course for professional purposes. Consequently, the “Reader” and “Debate” sections of the blog are focused on economic issues and news as a way to give a context and practise vocabulary and expressions related to their professional sector.

2. Why use blogs in my classes?

2.1 A source of input

In Iceland, there are very few chances for my students to practise their Spanish and they get most of the input from their classes. Taking into account the fact that all my students (as most of the Icelandic people) can access the Internet,¹¹ blogs were a good tool to use on my courses. The most positive aspect is that they gave me the chance to create a “Spanish environment” where my students could express themselves in Spanish. They could communicate in a virtual space with a real audience and with a real purpose. The contents used in the blog (articles, news, resources, images, etc.) could also be easily updated on a regular basis.

2.2 Distance and blended learning

Some of my students belong to the business community and it is often the case that due to their work schedule or because of a business trip they cannot always attend class. Sometimes, despite the fact that they want to keep on practising and studying a language, they give it up as they find it hard to follow the course. However, the use of blogs has improved the situation. Now, students can keep on working and collaborating in the course even if they are abroad or unable to attend class that day. All they need is an Internet connection.

My courses at the University of Reykjavik follow this schedule: Once a week I meet my students so we can focus on practising oral skills and maintain personal contact. The rest of the time we keep connected through the course blog where a dialogue about different issues is established. Students also feel that they are more autonomous and that they are more in control of their own learning process.

2.3 Blogs as a collaborative space

One of the greatest potentials of blogs is the ability to create spaces where students can collaborate with each other online. The read/write web opens up all sorts of new possibilities for students to learn from each other. The group blogs I run on the business Spanish courses are described as “a collaborative space created for and by the students of Reykjavik

11 According to the seventh survey published by Statistics Iceland on the use of ICT and the Internet by Icelandic households and individuals, results show that the vast majority of Icelandic households have a computer and access to the Internet. In 2008, 92% of households had a computer and 88% of households had access to the Internet. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that Iceland is the most web-savvy country, with a study showing it has the highest concentration of broadband users.

University”. They know that their collaboration and participation is absolutely necessary and that sense of responsibility helps them to be more autonomous in their learning process.

Students interact with each other through their comments asking for an explanation of a word they do not know, for more information about their lives, introducing new content and links to other interesting pages through hyperlinks or simply expressing their agreement or disagreement. They create a virtual Spanish learning community and when they arrive at class I usually hear things like: “Oh, yes, you mentioned that in the blog ...”. That sense of community helps the students to feel part of a group. They all work better together in class and social interaction is increased. The learning process here is less focused on the teacher and more on the students who do not expect the teacher to give them all the information. They create and construct their own knowledge. Students learn from each other, and if we focus on the linguistic aspect, we can see that after reading their classmates’ entries and comments, students end up adding structures and new words used by others. Collaborating with each other in order to build a project like this one also contributes to developing students’ social skills (for example, interaction and group work) that will have an important value in their future and professional careers.

2.4 A motivating tool

Having an audience is one of the most motivating factors of the read/write web. Students know that their comments and entries will be read by their classmates and that aspect makes them be careful about their writing and also motivates them to keep on publishing in the blog where they can express their own ideas and their own vision of the world. By reading and commenting on others’ entries, they start to learn from each other without the instructor being too directly involved. Their comments are as important as mine; they “build” the blog with them. This helps them to be more critical and analytical without waiting for the teacher’s opinion. They are not just readers and writers they are editors and collaborators as well.

The blog is a democratic tool that supports different learning styles, so for those students who might be more reticent to express their ideas in front of the class, a blog gives them the opportunity to share in writing the ideas they may be too shy to talk about. However, to make students participate is really important that we as teachers select topics and issues that are interesting for the students or related to their professional career.

3. My teaching experience with blogs: target students, content and evaluation

Over the last few years, some online tools such as blogs or forums have often been ignored by teachers, perhaps due to the perceived informality or maybe because some teachers think that those tools will involve extra work. I must admit that this can be a time-consuming exercise

depending on the size of the class. The best is to check the blogs every few days in order to prevent an overflow of unread, uncommented new blog entries.

The language courses I teach at the University of Reykjavik follow a continuous evaluation process and that means a substantial coursework requirement (in addition to examinations). On some courses, the schedule concentrates three hours in one class a week. So, I wanted to use our “face-to-face” class to focus on their oral skills (listening and speaking). But what about writing and the essays they were supposed to submit to me? At that point, blogs seemed to be the perfect solution. There were no more excuses like: “sorry, I forgot that I had to do this for the class ...” or no more getting worried about where I had left that student essay. The answer is simple: “It is on the blog”. We need to think about the blog as a great course management tool, a class portal where all the tasks are perfectly and safely kept.

The steps I followed to introduce the blog into our classes were the following. First, I set up a class blog at Blogger.com, which is owned by Google and it will host your blog for free. It is also one of the easiest to use and it has some levels of privacy that are important for a class blog. It was also a more authentic and real option than the intranet used in our university, which is more similar to a “closed garden”. Another benefit of applying to the classroom an open platform is that it will help to develop the students ICT skills as they will learn how to manage a blog (that includes publishing, downloading pictures, adding links to other interesting web pages using hyperlinks, etc.) and they will be ready to repeat the experience outside the academic environment.

The class blog was divided into sections: “*Nosotros*” (where they introduce themselves), “*Lecturas*” – a reading section (with updated news and economic articles); “Debate” (where they express their opinion about some sociocultural issue as “10 tips for a business meeting in Madrid”, “Spanish cultural stereotypes you have to avoid” or “how to start an export/import business between Spain and Iceland: useful tips and reliable sources to find information on the net”); “*Escucha la noticia*” (short films, songs, publicity adverts, etc. are included in this audiovisual section where they are also required to leave a comment); and “*Sugerencias*” (students decide the content of this section themselves by including links to resources, news ... anything they consider can be useful for the course). Apart from these sections, links to online resources (dictionaries, grammar exercises, and a glossary for business terms) are selected and included to help students and to promote a more autonomous learning process. Also, an anonymous survey (one of the many applications offered by Blogger.com) about different aspects of their learning process is included periodically. I am the administrator of the blog and I subscribe the students, who have previously registered with a gmail account (most of them usually have one). During the first classes, I explain them very carefully how the blog works and what they are expected to do. Most of my students had previous experience and that was very helpful for their classmates.

Roughly, a third of the coursework marks come from the blog. The students have to do different tasks in the blog weekly (by creating an entry) and also participate by reading and making comments in their classmates’ entries. I always correct the writing of the entries (in a different colour) but never the comments they make because they are made spontaneously and

I do not want to break the communication by making them feel too concerned about their correctness when expressing themselves in Spanish.

Once they got used to the blog dynamic, their participation and interaction was extremely high (although there are always some students that are more reluctant than others) and they started considering the blog an extension of the real classroom to a virtual one. Different blogs were used for each language course during the same period of time and these blogs were interconnected. So, students from different courses and levels could interact and learn from each other, thereby creating our Spanish virtual world. This learning environment can be easily extended to other countries: blogs designed by students in one country can be opened and linked to students from another country.

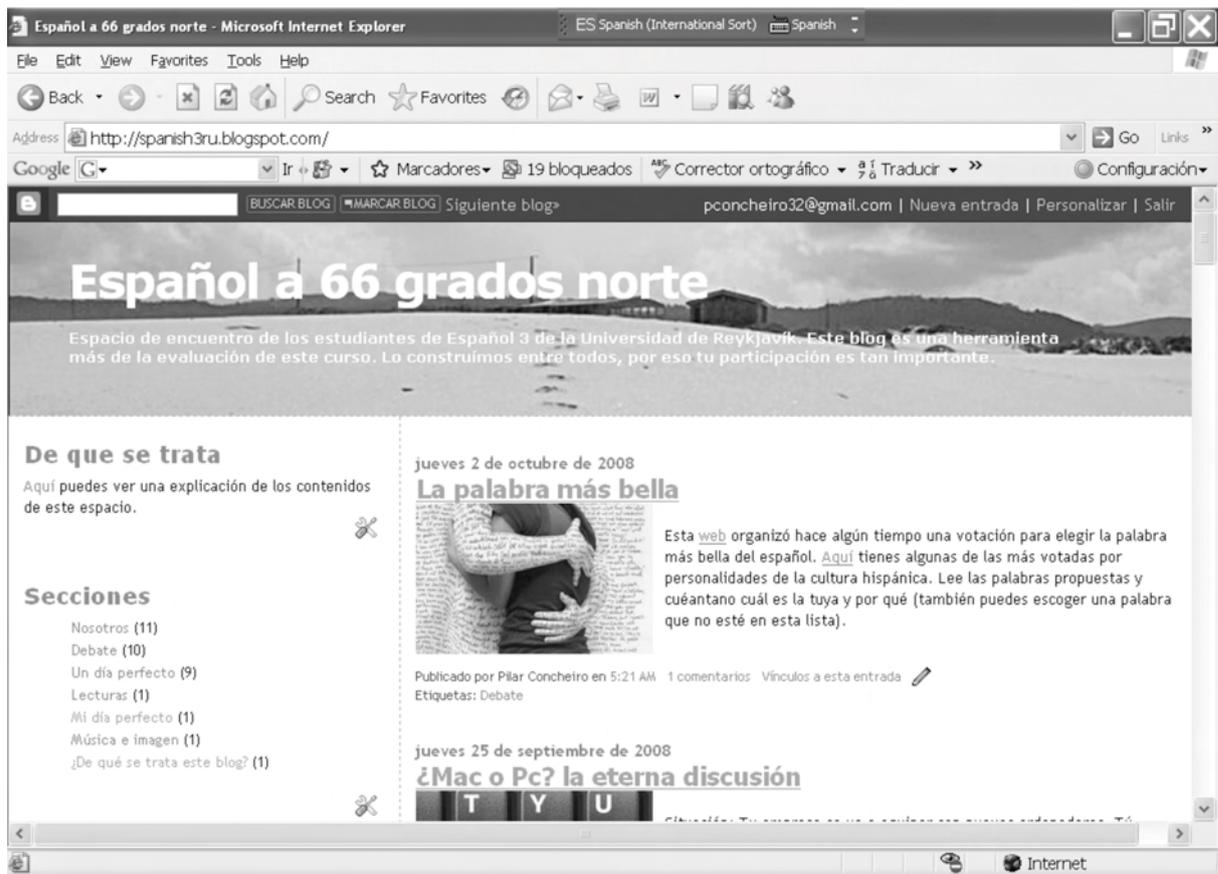


Figure 1: Spanish III blog

4. Conclusion

As a result of our work with blogs, students became more independent (by adding and selecting contents, practising at their own rhythm, choosing the learning resources they prefer, etc.) and at the same time they interact with each other. Students created contents and

collaborated with each other, they controlled their own learning process and they were able to work together and exchange their opinions with different learning communities. Is not this every teacher's dream? To teach our students to become independent thinkers and be open-minded about other cultures? Let us meet then in the blogosphere.¹²

If we give students a voice, they will certainly use it.

(Burguess 2006)

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12 Blogosphere is a collective term encompassing all blogs and their interconnections. It is the perception that blogs exist together as a connected community (or as a collection of connected communities) or as a social network.