

THE IMPACT OF STUDENT BLOGS ON THEIR PROFESSIONAL AND SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

In digital era technology is constantly reshaping our future and creates new demands for educators to bridge the gap between old school methodology and digitally-oriented professional landscape. Digital natives, who are flooding our universities at the moment, can't imagine their lives without mobile phones and social networks. The question that naturally arises is why not to use these ICT advances in and out of the classroom in order to enhance learners' outcomes in both hard and soft skills? The paper presents the study which evaluates the impact of tertiary-level student blogs in English on the development of their professional and social competences from the students' perspective. The research questions were: 1) to investigate the students' experience with running an educational blog; 2) to evaluate the impact of a student educational blog in Public Speaking Course on students' foreign language proficiency level perceived by language learners themselves; 3) to assess the students' beliefs and evaluations of the development of their soft skills due to the blogging technology interwoven into the academic process in Public Speaking Course at the university.

The method employed in the current research was a questionnaire study to find out learners' opinions about the impact of students' blogs on their professional and social competences. The experiment was conducted at Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University (Russia) in which two study groups participated with the total of 32 students. The participants as part of their Public Speaking course had to run a multi-media educational blog in the English language as a portfolio of their progress in this discipline. The questionnaire included demographic questions and research questions. Research questions addressed the respondents' experience with blogs, their attitudes to blogging, and the perceived impact of blogging technology on their foreign language proficiency level and soft skills.

The results of the study showed that most participants were interested in having more experience with both professional and personal blogs in the future and gave high ranking to the impact of such blogs on their foreign language acquisition. The research confirmed our hypothesis that students' multimedia blogs in the target language would have a positive impact on students' professional as well as social competences and would enhance their motivation and participation rates.

Keywords: *blog, professional competence, soft skills, hard skills, English language proficiency*

INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that nowadays students are digital natives, immersed in digital technology on daily basis. Today's tertiary students are the first generation to grow up on digital media and are expected to have a natural desire to use digital technology and Internet as their primary source of information. Moreover, most university students immerse themselves in a digital environment for entertainment and communication. They consistently obtain skills in daily communication via social media. Many students, known as the “web generation,” use social media as the dominant form of communication in many aspects of their lives and expect such technologies to be everywhere, including teaching and training [1].

At present Web 2.0 technologies, and especially blogs, are being used to engage students more fully in the learning process around the world, especially in the USA, UK, Australasia, Japan and South Korea [1], [2]. According to Aydin [3] the recent research in blog assisted language learning (BALL) deals with the following issues: the impact of blogs in language learning on gaining awareness of the target culture; blog effects on learners interactions and communications in the target language; the contributions of blogging to enhancing the main language skills, basically, writing and reading; the effects of the use of blogs on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner motivation and the learners' attitudes towards the target language as well as the effects of blogging on autonomous learning, information exchange as well as blogs as a learning space. However, the effectiveness of blogging as a technology is still not sufficiently examined: some studies support BALL [4], [5], [6], while others are quite cautious [7], [8].

In Russian higher education, the number of available social media tools has expanded significantly in recent years. But despite reports of successful ICT adoption in higher education [9], [10], there has been relatively little empirical research examining whether the use of blogs in teaching and learning a foreign language leads to increased learning outcomes. To the best of our knowledge, none of these studies have been conducted so far to assess the impact of student blogs in the target language on improving the level of language proficiency in all parameters of communicative language competence, as well as social competencies of students. Our current study uses a survey with quantitative research method to measure the impact of blogging technology on the development of professional and social competencies in students from a student perspective.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research questions were:

1. to investigate university students' experience with running an educational blog in English;
2. to evaluate the impact of a student educational blog in Public Speaking Course on students' foreign language proficiency level perceived by language learners themselves;
3. to assess the students' beliefs and evaluations of the development of their soft skills due to the blogging technology interwoven into the academic process in Public Speaking Course at the university.

The research reports the results of the questionnaire study, conducted at Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University (Russia) in June 2020 upon the completion of a semester course in Public Speaking by the fourth-year students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The language of instruction on the course was English. The course participants were upper-intermediate and advanced EFL speakers. The aim of the course was to give students fundamental knowledge of the basic concepts of oral public communication in English, to develop and consolidate the skills of collecting, assessing, organizing and pronouncing information in an interesting and meaningful form. As a result of taking this course, students should successfully master the skill of influencing the audience through public speaking. Alongside with the development of professional competencies of future EFL teachers during the Public Speaking course held in English, soft skills were among the course objectives as well, namely critical thinking, creativity, communication, time management and self-organization. To meet all these objectives blogging was chosen as a pedagogical technology to assist the learning process. As part of a course students were invited to run their personal educational blog in the target language that could serve as an e-portfolio of their progress in the discipline.

Blogs are an easy way to get students to produce a multimedia portfolio, documenting their work during a course as blogs can include text postings with essays, evaluations, reflections, reviews, etc. as well as images, audio and video (often self-recorded), and links to other websites and related multimedia. Blogs are interactive and allow visitors to leave comments and even message each other via widgets on the blogs and it is this interactivity that makes them particularly attractive in teaching and learning a foreign language. They provide an authentic forum for communication.

There are many free blog services, and blogs are very easy to create and have a professional look that makes them very attractive to exploit. The students in our research were recommended to use [blogger.com](https://www.blogger.com) as a free and user-friendly tool to create their own blogs. At the end of the course a student blog was supposed to

be submitted as part of the course assessment. The task was optional, but the vast majority of the students chose the option.

The designed questionnaire was compiled by drawing on our previous experience, some of the questions were adapted to meet the objectives of the current survey from our research published earlier [11]. The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first part was constructed of demographic questions (age, gender, the native language(s), the languages studied at the university, the languages spoken, the age when the respondent began to study the English language etc.), while the other three sections dealt with research questions. Research questions included yes/no questions, open-ended questions and multiple choice questions. The questions from the second and the third sections addressed the respondents' experience with running a blog, their attitudes to blogging, and the perceived impact of running their own educational blog in English on students' language competencies. The fourth section dealt with the students' opinions about the development of their soft skills due to the use of student blogs on a course of Public Speaking.

The questionnaire was administered online at the end of a course in Public Speaking after the course exam. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that a sufficient number of students who had experience in running an educational blog would take part in the survey. The students were not limited in time to fill in the form and could do that in their free time. The whole procedure of collecting the data took about 7 days. Descriptive statistics tools were used to process the results from yes/no and multiple-choice questions. Open ended questions were processed analyzing keywords and keyword frequencies. The five-point Likert scale was used to examine the students' beliefs about the impact of student blogs on their professional (hard skills) and social (soft skills) competencies.

The total of 32 students participated in the survey. Most participants in the research were female students (96.5%), which can be explained by student population in Russian pedagogical universities. Traditionally teaching profession in Russia is associated with female occupation due to certain cultural as well as economic reasons. The students' age was between 21 and 25, the majority of them being between 21 and 22. The average age range was 21.8 years. The languages studied by the subject group were: English (100%), German (62%) and French (38%). Other languages spoken by the respondents were Ukrainian, Kazakh, Yakut and Altai. The vast majority of the respondents began to study the English language in a primary school at the age of 8-9 as is prescribed by the State Educational Standards of Russian Federation.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

To investigate the students' experience with running an educational student blog in English and to evaluate the students' beliefs about the impact of blogging

on their professional and social competencies, we analyzed the results from the research questionnaire.

To find out the subjects' experience with blogging the respondents were given five questions to answer.

1. Have you ever done any blog before Public Speaking course?
2. Would you like to do another student blog in the future?
3. Would you recommend other students to do student blog in Public Speaking course?
4. Would you like to incorporate student blogs in your future teaching experience?
5. What kind of blog would you prefer to do in the future?

All subjects from the research group (100%) attended one semester Public Speaking course and chose to run their student blog as an e-portfolio for the course. The vast majority of the respondents (80%) had never had an experience of running any kind of blog before while 20% of them reported such kind of experience. The subjects (100%) gave a positive feedback on the use of blogs in learning and teaching as all of them (100%) are willing to do another student blog in the future and would definitely recommend other students to do a student blog in Public Speaking course. 90% of the respondents are eager to incorporate student blogs in their own future teaching experience. As for the last question in this section about the type of blog students are mostly interested in their future career, the answers could be grouped as follows: 70% preferred professional blogs, 20% voted for personal blogs while 10% would choose both. On the whole the results from this section clearly demonstrate the extremely positive attitude to blogging on the part of the research participants.

As for the evaluation of the impact of student blogs on students' foreign language proficiency (hard skills for EFL learners), the following six communicative language competencies have been chosen in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic and orthographic competences. A 5-point Lickert scale was used to measure students' preferences here. The subjects were invited to rank these competencies from one to five according to their preferences with five being the highest impact of blogging experience [11]. It should be noted that all language proficiency descriptors were positively evaluated by Russian students and all average entries were above 4 points. The subjects gave the highest ranking to the impact of student blog on their phonological control (96%) and orthography (98%). This could be explained by the multimedia nature of the student blogs in Public Speaking. Students were regularly asked to embed their audio and video performances with lots of speaking tasks on the blog for self and peer evaluations. As for orthography students always had a chance to double check their spelling before and while posting that helped them improve their spelling skills. The respondents also gave equally high ranking to the impact of blogs on their semantic and lexical competences (90% and 89%

respectively) as they worked on variety and precision in communicating their ideas both in writing and in speaking, while the impact of blogging on grammar can be characterized as less significant from the learners' perspective (72%). The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. The evaluated impact of student blogs on students' linguistic competencies

Types of linguistic competence	The subjects' ranking (%)
phonological control	96
semantic competence	90
lexical competence	89
grammar	72
orthography	98

It was also of great interest to our research to find out the estimated value of student blogs in a target language on the four speech activities: reading, writing, speaking and listening. All the subjects reported a profound increase of their competence in writing and speaking, whereas reading and listening were not among the highly ranked activities. As student blogs were components of a course in Public Speaking which presupposed loads of communication-based tasks and practices in both productive modes of interaction, participants' favourable assessment of these parameters can be easily explained.

A detailed analysis of students' beliefs about the impact of blogging on the development of their social competencies (soft skills) revealed that the respondents rated equally highly the impact of student blogs on all chosen descriptors, namely critical thinking (94%), communication (90%), time management and self-organization (96%), and creativity (92%). The format of this section coincided with the previous section in a questionnaire. A 5-point Lickert scale was used to measure students' preferences. The subjects were invited to rank the descriptors from one to five according to their preferences with five being the highest impact of student blogs. The results are presented in table 2.

Table 2. The evaluated impact of student blogs on students' social competencies

Types of social competencies	The subjects' ranking (%)
critical thinking	94
communication	90
time management and self-organization	96
creativity	92

It's worth noting that the average ranking in this section was never below 4.5. The highest points (96%) were given to time management and self-organization as students were required to keep strict deadlines weekly and thus trained

themselves in being more punctual. As blogging is a highly interactive technology with students being able to leave comments and exchange messages such kind of activity fostered regular peer communication and evaluation. Feedback from peers and the instructor on blog posts happened to be enormously motivating for the course participants. It also increased opportunities for interaction outside the classroom during the lockdown period. Although in their comments, the subjects admitted that they really missed the communication in the classroom. As for the level of creativity, thanks to blogging, students have become more responsible for the multimedia design of their written communication. Blogs have always been accompanied by pictures, audio-video posts and creative design. They became a kind of “window” on a student’s creative self and as such fostered respondents’ creativity.

CONCLUSION

Our research was primarily dedicated to the students’ evaluation of the impact of blogging technology on the development of students’ professional and social competencies. The educational research project was realized at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University as a structural element of an academic program of Public Speaking course. The research participants were invited to run their student blogs as an e-portfolio of their progress and to submit them as a structural element of the course assessment. The detailed analysis of the questionnaire results revealed high academic potential of blogging technology for training both professional and social competencies of EFL students. The subjects turned out to be highly motivated and inspired to produce a multimedia blog of good value, that would be worthwhile visiting by both peers and the instructor as well as a broader audience. More than 90% of research participants made their blogs open to general public. The subjects claimed that blogging was a promising technology with high potential for learning and teaching both a foreign language and soft skills development and plan to integrate blogs in their teaching career. Indeed, a blog provides “a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provides a disinhibiting context and offers a completely new form with unchartered creative potential” [12].

In our digital world students can’t imagine their lives without social networks and messengers, communication on them is their daily routine. Educators have to admit that Web 2.0 platforms and technologies revolutionized the teaching process and made it more learner-centered and authentically communicative, which is what after all we aspire as tutors who are genuinely interested in the development of soft and hard skills of our students. The research findings have implications for both teachers and students, as they can be used as guidelines to help ensure the successful use of student educational blogs in EFL teaching and learning.

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