

## PEDAGOGY

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### Encouraging Students' Self-Study Through the Use of Blogs in EFL Teaching

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**Abstract.** The article is focused on the use of blogs as an educational tool that enhances active English language learning at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski". Through blogs students can interact with each other, improve their writing and research skills, develop time management skills and self-initiative. Blogs have undeniable advantages and can be very helpful with Elementary level students, who do not feel confident in their language skills; they can also, encourage creativity and help shy and reserved students enjoy language learning. Incorporating blogs in the self-study process provides the most beneficial features of both active and interactive learning methods. On one hand, students improve various language skills by not simply listening, but creating, participating and reflecting on the learning process. And on the other hand, students can work in a calm environment, at suitable time; they will be more focused, keeping in mind that others will read their posts, and will easily receive feedback from the teacher and their peers.

**Keywords:** *blog, self-study, active learning, EFL teaching*

**Introduction.** The article is focused on the use of blogs as an educational tool that enhances active English language learning at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski". Through blogs students can interact with each other, improve their writing and research skills, develop time management skills and self-initiative.

Although English language is omnipresent in student's environment, learning it seems to be a challenge for many of them. This mostly applies to Elementary level students who lack skills in grammar use, writing and speaking. As students at the Faculty major in Software Technology and Design, Mathematics, and Business Information Technology, they often have difficulties in language learning, due to fact that their efforts and skills are targeted at a different scientific field. The curriculum schedules English language classes during the first and second semester of the first year of studies. On the other hand, the English classes' curriculum at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics is prepared to provide not only solid classroom practice, but also sufficient time for self-study. Thus, to fully utilize this opportunity a larger volume of individual tasks are involved.

This raises the need for various, stimulating and educational assignments that can occupy students' time for self-study, and also provoke their interest and inspire them to learn and explore.

**Active Learning and the Use of Blogs.** In *Seven Principles for Good Practice* Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson point out that students do not learn much by simply being in class and listening to the teacher. They need to talk about what they are learning, write about it, correlate it with past experience and apply it in everyday life.[1, p. 330] These are some of the basic principles of active learning. Active learning, as opposed to passive learning, is an approach which encourages students to study through reading, writing, talking, listening, and contemplating. Active learning places students in an interactive learning environment, which has a number of indisputable advantages. Interactive classroom management requires that knowledge learning, formation of skills, attitudes building, provocation of independent thinking, and

personal development happen simultaneously. Furthermore, the interaction realized in the learning process is not merely between teachers and trainees but between trainees themselves, where they learn from each other's previous knowledge and experience. From passive consumers of already existing ideas and truths, students become active partners of the teacher and create their own knowledge. What is more, teachers themselves are participants in the process of group learning and development - they are open, flexible, sensitive to others, able to cope equally well with academic challenges and the pedagogical and sociological aspects of the educational environment and interaction. A peaceful, positive and stimulating learning environment is maintained, as well as effective feedback.

It is necessary to distinguish between active and interactive teaching methods when we consider effective classroom management. Active methods place the learner in an active learning position where s/he can acquire knowledge themselves. Interactive methods, in turn, require association with a particular group; they suggest an interaction with other learners and dialogical communication with these learners, which is extremely useful when learning a foreign language, e.g. English. Both of these methods can be applied not only to classroom activities, but also to self-study tasks.

Incorporating blogs in the self-study process provides the most beneficial features of both active and interactive learning methods. As Connolly states, "The exercise of writing a blog encourages students to think about and expand on their own ideas and thoughts about their culture and community. Students have the opportunity to interact with content material as well as other students' work. They use their background knowledge and preconceptions to respond to new ideas, comment on posts, and make connections with academic topics of current study. A classroom blog provide students with the opportunity to form an interactive community. The focus is on learning and sharing information, motivating students to discover the benefits of becoming lifelong learners. Blogs also provide students with opportunities to become "experts" on a topic and share their knowledge with others. An in-

teractive community develops as students read and then comment what they have read.” [4, p. 5-6]

#### Blogs- Definition, Characteristics and Advantages

There are countless definitions of what exactly is a blog, so I have extracted a very concise interpretation of the term: A blog (weblog) is an online journal that an individual can continuously update with their own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so. Unlike a standard website, weblog entries are made by typing directly into the browser and with the click of a button are instantly published on the internet. Blogging (the action of writing a blog) does not require sophisticated ICT skills, therefore it can be easily used in EFL teaching, even by a teacher who has moderate computer proficiency. Furthermore, the blog is interactive, in the sense that readers can respond to any given entry with a comment or even threaded discussions. The tone is informal and the blogger speaks generally in their own natural voice and tone. [1], [3, p. 26-30].

Before introducing the blog self-study assignment to students one has to consider the most appropriate and useful blogging platform for that matter. There is a wide choice online which can be a little confusing. Thus, here are a few features to look for when choosing a blog spot: first, it would be wisely to start with a free platform - this will ensure that if at some point the teacher changes their mind, the platform can be replaced without any major concussion. Another thing to look for is a maximum user-friendly and installation-free platform - that will ease both teacher and students. For the nature of the assignment features and functionality are also very significant- the blog has to be not only useful for its purpose, but also appealing and interactive. Some of the most popular platforms are *Blogger*, *WordPress* and *Tumblr*, the latter except from blogging also provides social network elements.

Using a blog involves some of the most essential active learning techniques- the methods and techniques of collecting information, and those of generating and creative summarizing of ideas. To note its further advantages we have to make a distinction between different types of blogs. The two most productive variations are the teacher's blog and the student's blog.

The advantages of the blog administrated by the teacher include the following. [6, p. 427]

- Easy and immediate real-time upload of assignments, lecture materials, notifications or announcements, accessible from anywhere;

- Publishing of external links to websites for additional reading or discussion tasks;

- Chronological order of every post, which can be particularly useful when there is a strict deadline for the publication;

- The possibility of creating and monitoring a working environment where students revise and comment each other's postings;

- The opportunity for the teacher to encourage self-initiative among students as they are let to choose the subject of tasks and assignments for the next post;

- Easier way to check student's posts for plagiarism- which will also notably reduce the threat for that as students are aware of the risk;

The advantages of the student's blog cover an even wider range of activities:

- First of all, students can be active participants in choosing the blogging platform which they are going to use- this will encourage them to be active, as well as make them feel an important and appreciated part of the learning process;

- Secondly, the very building of their blog and its customization require creativity and vision that will provoke student's interest; [6, p. 427]

- Also, blog development and participation can “empower students to become more analytical and critical”; [5, p. 616-621]

- As expected, the blog will mainly provide practice on writing, which is essential for Elementary level students, who tend to be shy and indecisive with such tasks;

- What is more, blogging will also improve their research skills- students will be more careful with what they publish when they know that not only the teacher, but also their colleagues will read the post;

- As the blog reveals the time and date of the publication, students will be more attentive with deadlines;

- Students' speaking skills will also be enhanced- after each self-study writing task, there will be a discussion back in the classroom, where students will be prepared to comment on the latest publications;

- Students have the freedom to relate their posts to external websites, they can also place links and pictures to design their post, and as blogs suppose informal tone and personal style, they will feel at ease to project their thoughts and ideas;

- Finally, there is the exciting opportunity that students can be involved in a cross-cultural project, where they can create a team blog with a student at a similar language level but from another country; [6, p. 428]

**Conclusion.** Blogs have undeniable advantages and can be very helpful with Elementary level students, who do not feel confident in their language skills. Blogs encourage creativity and are a useful tool to help shy and reserved students enjoy language learning. Teachers, however, have to be very careful and precise about certain risks. First they need to be strict with deadlines- students have to be prepared that this is not a leisure social networking with their peers, but is a part of the learning process. Thus, those who disrespect the deadlines will be penalized. What is more, teachers have to prepare a detailed plan of the activities they will assign for the blog projects. The clearer their idea is, the easier it will be to implement the schedule and decide whether students follow the set criteria. Teachers can set for a discussion some of the blogging tasks, but should not let the students decide on the whole schedule, otherwise there is the danger of disagreement on the subjects and materials which will prolong the assignments and disturb the deadlines. It has to be noted that students should not be expected to start blogging immediately as English classes start. This is crucial with Elementary level students, who lack experience in using the language. It is suitable to plan the blogging project for the second semester. During the first semester students will gain some knowledge and experience of English and will be more enthusiastic to participate in a blogging activity. This will also allow the teacher to prepare an adequate plan for the self-study assignments. The teacher can also use the end of the first semester to conduct a survey asking about students' previous experience

with blogs and their recommendations what platform to use and what subjects to discuss.

It is vital to clarify that blogging does not substitute for the grammar, writing, listening and speaking lessons in class or the self-study tasks regarding grammar and vo-

cabulary learning. The use of the blog is an additional activity and its function is to perfect the language skills not to form them. Used wisely blogs can contribute to EFL teaching, positively influence students' concentration and interest in language learning.

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#### **Бойкова К.Д. Стимулирование самостоятельной работы студентов путем использования блога в обучении английскому языку**

**Аннотация.** Статья фокусируется на использовании блогов в качестве образовательного инструмента, который может стимулировать активное усвоение знаний на занятиях по английскому языку на Факультете математики и информатики при Пловдивском университете им. Паисия Хилендарского. С помощью блогов студенты могут воздействовать друг на друга, улучшать свою самоинициативу, письменные умения, умение проводить исследование и умение управлять временем. Блоги обладают бесспорными преимуществами и могут быть очень полезны для студентов, находящихся на начальном этапе владения английским языком, которые не уверены в своих языковых компетенциях, а также могут стимулировать креативность и помочь замкнутым и неуверенным студентам участвовать активно на занятиях по иностранному языку. Включение блогов в часы самоподготовки обеспечивает преимущества как активных, так и интерактивных методов обучения. С одной стороны, студенты совершенствуют разнообразные языковые компетенции, не просто слушая, а участвуя в процессе обучения и применения усвоенного. С другой стороны, благодаря возможности работать в спокойной обстановке, в подходящее для них время, студенты могут проявить большую сосредоточенность и внимание к тому, что они пишут, зная, что их товарищи по учебе будут читать эти публикации, и могут рассчитывать на обратную связь со стороны преподавателя и других студентов.

**Ключевые слова:** блог, самоподготовка, активное усвоение, обучение английскому языку