

## **Learning Spanish with Technology: Blogs.**

*The multimedia and interactive capabilities of the Internet enable educators to help students develop and/or improve their skills, while providing a supplementary learning environment. This case study explores the function of blogs as an asynchronous computer mediated communication (CMC) tool in the technology revolution that is taking place in higher education, especially in foreign languages (FL) learning.*

***Index Terms:** Foreign language education, Internet technologies, blog, reading, writing and vocabulary acquisition*

**Abstract.** Foreign Language (FL) learning has entered a new phase by incorporating Internet based technology to its programs. In an increasingly computerized academic world, the use of another tech-tool seems a logical step. This project concentrates on the use of weblogs at the intensive intermediate level in Spanish FL classrooms. In our study, a blog refers to “a website in which items are posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order” (Wikipedia).

The case study we present examines weblogs as part of the extracurricular activities for undergraduate students enrolled in second year Spanish. Following Henry Farrell’s five major uses of blogs in education (2003) we try to study and assess, from an educational perspective, the impact of this Internet technology as a potential platform for learning and as a space where students can improve their interactions in Spanish. Specifically, we analyze whether a weblog is capable of accelerating the development of reading and writing skills, vocabulary acquisition, and basic research skills. These questions will be addressed in several ways when we examine which uses of weblogs are particularly beneficial for the learning process. Finally, we comment on the opportunities that weblogs offer for the future and the areas in which they can be applied.

The use of a blog has several advantages for both instructors and students. From the point of view of an instructor, blogs are easy to manage compared to traditional paper and pencil methods and allow the instructor to link internet items related to their courses, customizing the content to the goals of each class. Blogs also store all information and make it visible, providing researchers with a transcript of all user exchanges. At the same time, blogs may enhance vocabulary acquisition and may improve research, reading and writing skills (Kern 1995; Blake 2000). Students are encouraged to pay more attention when they write, since they know anybody can read their postings. In such a way, blogs provide instructors with real data that they can use to evaluate one aspect of the students’ performance.

Blogs also focus more on active learning and production rather than passive listening. From the perspective of the students, blogs may intensify their interest towards foreign language learning by combining an innovative, cutting-edge, contemporary Internet technology with a traditional approach. They make a difference in day-to-day language lessons since blogs place students in a situation of equity by offering the same writing space to articulate their opinions in a non-threatening context (Warschauer 1997). This is in contrast with regular FL sessions where students’ performance may be influenced by affective factors such as shyness or nervousness. In addition, students may get to know each other better by reading materials from their classmates, providing the opportunity to expand on discussions outside of the class context. Some of these benefits

are similar to those created by other Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools (Swaffar 1998; Blake 2000).

For the purpose of this investigation, a blog has been incorporated as a supplementary activity into two sections of second year Spanish during one semester (16 weeks) Those students who decided to participate were awarded extra class credit based on the content of their blog contribution.. A total of 55 students were enrolled in the two sections. Students were given a fifteen minutes training session on how to use blogs: log in, write postings, and publish comments. At the end of each week, an extra activity with instructions related to topics discussed in class was added to the blog, participants logged in the blog at any time to write their postings. Two research methods were used for this project. First, a questionnaire was developed to collect data about students' attitudes and perceptions towards FL learning, pre- and post-blog implementation. Students' responses were analyzed at the end of the academic semester. Second, the performance of students who have blogged was evaluated in relation to the performance of students who decided not to blog. For this comparison, we examined the results of each student on four exams distributed along the academic semester. Special attention was given to reading comprehension, vocabulary and writing activities.

The preliminary results of this study suggest that students who used blogs have improved their language proficiency related to reading and writing skills. In addition, an expanded interaction among students started to develop in class when they initiated conversations about their blog postings. Blogs start as a content and language based tool, which then, develop a community of learners. This alternative to the classroom environment represents to some educators a new way of promoting improved learning among students for several relevant reasons: it appeals to the current generation of students' learning mode; provides for flexible learning; and enables new kinds of learning (Owston 1997). As a result, the process of reading on-line, engaging a community and reflecting it on-line is a process of bringing life into learning. For Stephen Downes (2004) this is a key element of an Internet technology like educational blogging, since they bring authenticity and engagement.

An avenue for further study considers the communicative features of blogs. Their social aspect, mentioned above, can make blogs a part of the public sphere (Mortensen & Walker 2002, and Thompson 2003). This is a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed when all people have equal access (Habermas 1984). The space where students commented on course topics may have become a micro public sphere.

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