Contribution of New Technologies in Teaching Business English

Pašková Hana, Zsapková Eleonóra

Abstract:

Teaching Business English at the University of Economics in Bratislava aims at improving students´ competencies in all language skills. One of the ways how to increase the quality of teaching process is also using weblog applications. Within our research project we analysed the positive effects of applying weblogs in teaching Business English. The aim of the project was to find out the degree in which the regular assessment of weblog assignments improves writing skills of students. During the period of three years we used different methods of error correction in students´ writing assignments. At Business English lessons we analyzed and explained grammatical, lexical and stylistic mistakes with the highest frequency. At the end of each term we compared the results of experimental groups and control groups which did not participate in the project. In our paper we analyze results of our research which prove that using weblogs in teaching Business English improves writing skills of university students.

Key words: web applications, language skills development, writing skills, assessment, error correction

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1. Introduction

Using weblog applications in teaching Business English at the university level is not common in Slovakia although research results show that it contributes substantially to improving the effectiveness of teaching process. Therefore we decided to prepare the research project The Influence of Web Applications on the Development of Language Skills" the aim of which was to prove that regular and well designed web applications positively influence the language competence of students and development of language skills especially reading comprehension and writing.

The research project was designed to last for the period of three years. At the beginning we concentrated on analyzing and comparing methodological aspects and procedures used when realizing the project. Six teachers from the Department of English from the University of Economics in Bratislava, who took part in this project, gave assignments to experimental groups of students participating in the project. The initial stage of the students´ language competence was assessed by teachers at the beginning of each term. Students in experimental and control groups were asked to write essays on the given topics with the limited number of words. The same procedure was repeated at the end of each term and the teachers again compared the results of experimental and control groups to find out the extent of language skills improvement.

Students of the experimental groups were given regular written assignments during the whole term with the aim to practise and develop reading comprehension and writing skills. These assignments were corrected and evaluated by the teachers with the aim to identify the most frequent mistakes. The most significant language problems were subsequently analysed and during English lessons teachers focused on practising correct grammatical and lexical forms.

2. Theoretical background of using   weblogs in teaching foreign languages

Campbell (2003, p.1) provides this definition of the weblog "A weblog (or 'blog') can be thought of as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her 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".

According to Pinkman (2005, p.21) "blogs are authentic, interesting and communicative resources that can serve a variety of purposes in the foreign language classroom. A medium to reflect on material, inquire into issues, and interact with others, blogs provide a rich and easy-to-use environment for both learners and instructors. The recent popularity of blogs, as well as their user-friendly nature, makes them an obvious choice for instructors wanting to introduce out-of-class resources to their learners."

Jason (2004, p.3) states that "For the language teacher the weblog is a timely arrival which can fulfil many of the needs identified for the effective teaching of writing. The weblog provides a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provides a dis-inhibiting context and offers a completely new form with un-chartered creative potential." Jason suggests that blogging not only improves writing skills but also helps to develop reading skills.

Johnson (2004) points out that the application of blogs is a useful supplemental aid to teachers. From any computer connected to the Internet, teachers can create, edit, or delete their teaching handouts, homework assignment, and review materials. All these teachers´ messages will be organized in a reverse chronological order with the latest postings on the top.

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Campbell (2003) divides blogs into three categories:

Tutor blog is organised by the language teacher. It encourages learners to do reading practice and it provides links for additional study. The content of this type of blog can be related to syllabus and teachers can use it to give homework assignments.

- Class blog is a space where the teacher and students may contribute. They may express their opinions following from discussion topics taught in language lessons. Students are encouraged to react more deeply on themes discussed in the class. The role of the students is more active as they have chance to write about given topics.

- Learner blog is very demanding for the teacher as it is time-consuming and it requires a lot of effort from the teacher to set it up and interact with students. It involves giving each student an individual blog. The benefit of this type of blog is that each student has his/her own personal online space. Students can express their opinions and post comments on other students' blogs.

According to Graham (2005) the main advantages of using weblogs are following:

- weblogs provide extra reading practice for students
- inform students about online resources appropriate for their level
- build a closer relationship between students by sharing information about their opinions and attitudes and reacting to other students´ writing
- provide space for inhibited students to express themselves
- encourage out-of-class discussion and later can be used as the starting point for the discussion during language lessons
- influence the quality of the students´ written work as they expect that their written contributions will be read not only by the teacher but also by their peers

- represent online portfolio of students ´written work.

However even if the weblogs have huge potential in teaching foreign languages there are still some disadvantages and problems and therefore teachers should try to avoid them when using weblogs in the classroom. Dosik and Dogkyun (2013) mention difficulty some students with low English proficiency may experience when they are afraid that other students may read their writing and see the mistakes they have made. Not all students may like the fact that blogs don´t ensure privacy. Anyone with access to the Web can find and read a blog and express some critical comments which may discourage students from further publishing.

3. The research and methods

The research project at the University of Economics in Bratislava was designed for the period of three academic years. All students who participated in the project passed successfully school leaving exams at the level B1 or B2. Despite the fact that the language competence of students was on relatively high level, there were still some problems regarding reading comprehension and writing. Therefore our project was designed to eliminate these drawbacks and increase efficiency in the mentioned language skills. Resulting from our teaching experience we can say that reading comprehension is considered both by teachers and students as the area with fewer problems in comparison with other language skills. Therefore increasing students´ writing skills has been our priority. To achieve this aim our first task was to select appropriate materials. Our choice of proper materials for implementation of weblogs in the teaching process was closely related to the level of students´ language proficiency as well as to the topics taught in Business English courses. Another criterion we applied when selecting materials was to widen students´ specialized business vocabulary and at the same time inspire and provoke critical thinking of students and their creative approach towards solving suggested problems. We selected materials which were interesting, up-to-date and motivating for our students.

Rivers and Temperley (1978) state that when choosing materials we have to take into account the fact that the proper materials develop esthetical feelings, imagination and the ability to find the appropriate approach to solving problems. The choice of materials was then followed by the next phase: students who participated in the project had to read the weblog texts thoroughly to be able to fulfil given assignments. We designed the assignments after analysing students´ needs in the area of language skills improvement with the emphasis on the development of writing skill. We proceeded from simpler tasks requiring short and simple answers to more demanding assignments where the students could express their opinions, attitudes, ideas or suggest solutions of particular problems. Students were asked e.g. to express their opinion, either supportive or negative, to react on the content of the article, to suggest their own creative solutions of the submitted problems or finally to write essays in which they critically evaluated given issues connected to the topics having some relation to the themes included in the syllabus.

Writing assignments via weblogs was for students from experimental groups one of the requirements to complete the course successfully. When correcting assignments we took into account the fact that teachers as well as most language learners consider writing as a difficult-to-acquire skill and rather time-consuming. Sarigul (2005, p.2) says that "correction process is for teachers almost invariably a futile effort since most of the corrected written work is tucked away into the books or notebooks and forgotten there. Moreover, this kind of spoon-feeding approach might leave students disarmed in the future as they will not be fully aware of the mistakes they have made at each stage of writing process such as copying, doing exercises, guided and free writing." Correcting students´ written assignments is usually an

industrious effort while feedback is often not very fruitful and it can lead both the teacher and students to frustration. Therefore some theorists suggest that the most effective way of correcting mistakes is when students correct their errors themselves. Brumfit´s (1980) suggests that the correction process should be a genuine learning process by using an effective self-correction technique through which learners will become skilled mistake recognizers. According to Brumfit there are following advantages in students´ correcting their own written assignments:

1. Practice in looking for mistakes in other students´ written work helps find mistakes in his/her own assignments more easily.
2. Students who do correction immediately learn more effectively as the points they studied are still fresh in their mind.
3. Pair or group discussions can help develop also speaking skill as they discuss mistakes and try to reach consensus among themselves.
4. For teachers it is not a passive criticism but a constructive activity that can lead to putting more responsibility to students and can develop a sense of self-sufficiency.

In the first phase of our project teachers corrected mistakes and prepared analysis of the most frequent mistakes which provided the basis for further remedy exercises practised during English lessons. When correcting mistakes we tried to differentiate mistakes that hamper communication message from those which do not have such significant impact on the communication of message. "A mistake which leads to a breakdown in communication is a non-standard use of the code which interrupts the clear communication of ideas" (Dawson, 2013, p.1). Resulting from our teaching experience we are conscious that this theoretical approach is not always followed by language teachers who are often inclined to treat all mistakes as equal. We agree with Dawson´s opinion that occasional mistakes of the form do not create communication problems while mistakes of meaning can lead to communication breakdown and are more serious. Language teachers should be aware of the fact that students who want to express more complicated ideas naturally make more mistakes. Dawson states that "their desire to communicate is greater than their competence in communication" (2013, p.2). Therefore language teachers should encourage their students not to be afraid of communicating in a foreign language and broadening their language competence even though they make mistakes. Dawson thinks that teachers´ attitude to mistakes should be "positive". We should not punish students for making mistakes as these mistakes create an opportunity to learn something new.

In the first stage of our project we corrected all errors with the result that we often sent students´ work back with a great deal of underlining, crossings-out or question marks. We wanted students "to learn" from frequent mistakes which we marked very carefully and in detail. We are aware of the fact that this intensive correction of mistakes can be even counter-productive. Harmer (2004) suggests that we do not have to correct all mistakes in a students´ work. He supports the idea of "selective correction" in order to avoid the proliferation of red ink all over students´ work. We can correct only word order or tenses or we can highlight mistakes in punctuation or we can judge the use of appropriate levels of formality. As Harmer says if we use a selective approach and we want it to be effective, students have to know what the teacher should be looking out for. They will pay more attention to the area marked for the correction.

Our aim in the second phase of the project was to avoid using a lot of underlining and crossings-out when correcting the written assignments. We concentrated on selective correcting of grammatical structures and lexical forms. We did not use the direct form of correction but instead we just highlighted mistakes in bold. The task of students was to find

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out the correct version of incorrectly used expressions or grammatical structures and substitute the originally incorrect parts. Then we controlled posted corrected versions and prepared the analysis for the following lesson. Thus we found out where the students had the biggest problems and we could adjust the lesson plan so that more time was devoted to explaining and practising the lexical and grammatical forms which occurred with the highest frequency and the most severely influenced the communicative message.

5. Conclusion

The aim of our project was to evaluate whether the application of weblogs in teaching Business English significantly contributes to the effectiveness of teaching process. To be able to identify the progress the students had achieved we compared the results of experimental and control groups. At the beginning and the end of each term students in experimental and control groups were asked to write essays on the given business topics related to the syllabus of English lessons. The extent of these essays, written during English lessons, was limited with precisely determined number of words. All students had consistent conditions and time limit and were supposed to work independently without the Internet or dictionaries. When correcting assignments we decided to use Harmer´s table of symbols denoting individual categories of mistakes.

Symbol	Meaning
S	Incorrect spelling
WO	Wrong word order
G	Grammatical mistake
T	Wrong tense
C	Concord. Subject and verb do not agree
Λ	Something has been left out
WW	Wrong word
{ }	Something is not necessary
?M	Meaning is not clear
P	Punctuation wrong
F/I	Too formal/informal

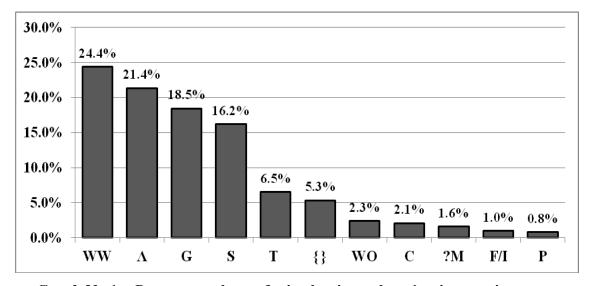**Table No.1 Harmer´s Table of Correction Symbols**
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Harmer (2004, p.111) says that correction symbols have "the advantage of encouraging students to think about what the mistake is, so that they can correct it themselves". There does not exist set list of symbols but Harmer´s correction symbols are used frequently. The symbols are written above or next to the mistake and the student has to be familiar with them and then he/she makes the necessary adjustment to his or her writing. In our research project we decided to use the Harmer´s table of correction symbols due to the fact that it provided the valuable source of quantitative analysis of the most relevant categories of mistakes. Results reached during four terms of existence of the project prove that the students in experimental groups reached better results than the students from control groups. We compared the written work of 362 students who attended the classes taught by 2 teachers while half of them were in the experimental group and the other half in the control group. After thorough analysis of the results we have to admit that we expected that differences between experimental and control groups would be more significant. On the basis

of error correction according to Harmer´s Table of Correction Symbols we evaluated the progress students from the experimental group had made. Although the entrance tests did not show the significant differences between students in the experimental and control groups, the final results at the end of each semester show that the students from experimental groups reached the certain level of improvement in all categories with the exception of two of them.

The analyses of mistakes in written works of our students showed us the most serious grammatical drawbacks so that we could concentrate on practising the areas with the highest frequency of mistakes with the aim of their gradual elimination (table No.2, graph No.1). The results of our research work represent valuable source for further improvement of methodological approach in teaching writing skills and are hoped to inspire foreign language teachers to incorporate blogs into a foreign language curriculum.

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Symbol	Number of mistakes	Percentage share of mistakes
S	468	16.2%
WO	68	2.3%
G	534	18.5%
T	188	6.5%
C	60	2.1%
Λ	618	21.4%
WW	706	24.4%
{ }	154	5.3%
?M	46	1.6%
P	23	0.8%
F/I	29	1.0%

Table No.2   Quantitative analysis of mistakes

Graph No.1   Percentage share of mistakes in students´ written assignments

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Despite the fact that weblogs provide learners with the opportunity to work by themselves it is important to know that technology itself doesn´t guarantee better education or automatically make students learn. The role of the teacher is not replaceable and he should always act as a guide and encourage students throughout the learning process. Teachers should monitor students´ progress and give them the appropriate feedback. Weblogs have been increasingly implemented in teaching foreign languages and their importance is essential especially in the environment where student have only limited access to the target language. They contribute to more effective learning of foreign languages and facilitate writing process and mutual teacher and students´ interaction.

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