

The Use of a Blog to Foster Sound Pronunciation Skills and Reflection upon Suprasegmental Features

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Abstract

The following paper will report on the 2010-2011 implementation of a blog in English Phonetics and Phonology I at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. Section one of the presentation comprises a theoretical discussion about the construction of knowledge and university education, the development of technology and its impact on education, blogging and EFL instruction, and the rationale behind blogging in P&PI. Section two describes the two-year blogging experience, including reference to the major aspects of the blog (both its appearance and contents), presents details about a survey on students' evaluation of the tool at the end of 2010, and discusses implications, future applications and main conclusions. The primary aim of this course is the teaching of English suprasegmental features. However, unlike other similar courses, P&PI is not exclusively concerned with the acquisition of English pronunciation skills but also with gaining a deep understanding of phonetic and phonological processes in oral communication. As stated in the course's syllabus, one of the primary aims of P&PI is helping learners develop the theoretical and methodological knowledge necessary for their professional careers as English language specialists. Therefore, a blog, with its inherent dialogical nature in a supportive learning environment, was considered a novel technological resource appropriate not only for developing pronunciation habits but also for reflecting on high-level pronunciation phenomena.

Key words: blog, pronunciation, phonetics and phonology, suprasegmentals

English pronunciation teaching and the use of digital technologies

In the last decades, ESL and EFL instruction has been characterised by a strong emphasis on communication. This means that the language instruction is directed towards the development of language abilities which go beyond grammar use and foster the use of language in contextualised life-like situations. The teaching of pronunciation is not oblivious to this shift in focus, and a course with this orientation is likely to offer a range of more controlled to freer communication activities. This kind of activities are designed to teach both the use of segmental (phonemes and allophones) and suprasegmental (word stress, rhythm and intonation) features (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996).

The language teaching panorama has also been affected, and to a great extent benefited, from the ever-increasing developments in communication technologies. These advances have enhanced the possibility of complementing classroom instruction as teachers can interact with their students in a non-traditional fashion and outside the classroom. This approach has paved the way for the emergence *Blended Learning*, which provides a possibility of implementing virtual tools with the purpose of enhancing effective learning (Sharma & Barret, 2007). In resorting to such resources as blogs, virtual classrooms and VLEs, it is possible to cater for different learning styles and strategies and to keep students motivated.

Concerning pronunciation teaching, it goes without saying that the most thought-of kind of technology-mediated instruction is related to recorders and playback devices. However, it is important to notice pronunciation learning can also be greatly benefited from visual resources. Several studies conclude that such resources contribute to the identification and acquisition of segmental and suprasegmental features (Chun, 2002, 2007a, 2007b; Hardison, 2007). Auspiciously, there are resources which offer a combination of both aural/oral and visual

resources for the development of pronunciation skills, which are of great advantage for both teachers and learners.

Blogging and ELT

As Kaye (2007) states, even though it developed in the late 1990s, it was not until the events of September 11th that blogging became popular and started to be used massively. A blog serves a wide range of purposes, and generally has a journal-like fashion (Griffith & Wong, 2010; Hao, 2010). However, as Crystal (2006: 241) states, “a blog is not simply a web page of indefinite length, down which one scrolls to read messages earlier in time. Anyone who restricted a blog in this way would be seriously underusing its potential functionality”.

Bloggers can do a number of things, and they can greatly benefit educators and learners.

There have been several studies reporting on the uses of blogs for educational purposes, and especially in Blog Assisted Language Learning. Even though the most salient benefit is that different language aspects can be further improved, blogging can aid other important factors of learning. Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) found that blogging increased motivation and also enhanced autonomous learning. Along the same lines, in higher education, it is also possible to use blogging as a means of lowering the emotional filter and encouraging students involved in distance learning (Dickey, 2004), and to create a sense of community among the users (Top, 2012). Most studies also conclude that students perceive blogs as enhancers of critical thinking, cooperation, motivation, and learning in general (Dickey, 2004; Top, 2012).

Apropos of blogging and phonetics and phonology, there is not much research which deals with the benefits, outcomes or learners' perceptions. One particular study, conducted by Ducate and Lomicka (2009), investigated the use of podcasts in improving pronunciation skills in German and French. The study showed that after the implementation of the project, no significant improvement was observed. However, along the same lines of the studies mentioned above, the students valued the activity positively, and expressed that “they

appreciated the feedback given for each scripted recording and enjoyed opportunities for creativity during extemporaneous podcasts” (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009: 66). There appear to exist no reported studies into the impacts of blogging at university EFL pronunciation classes, which makes the focus of this work as engaging as challenging.

Blog type and contents

Blogs can be classified according to the purpose they were designed. When they serve educational purposes, blogs are called *educational blogs* or *edublogs*. Campbell (2003) proposes a three-fold categorisation of educational blogs: *tutor*, *learner* and *class* blogs. The blog reported here (<http://phoneticsandphonologyi.blogspot.com>) is a tutor blog, as it was designed and managed by the instructor, and some of its contents are described in this section.

External links

The blog does not only encompass contents of the instructor’s devise or selection, but also links to other sources of interest. One of the first posts includes a link to a video where phonetician John Wells explains how to interpret pronunciation alternatives in the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary. This entry in particular had a considerable number of comments, in which learners wrote their opinions. Another post includes a link to phonetician John Maidment’s own blog, in which he dealt with word stress. In this entry, students are encouraged to compare the discussions made in class on the topic and the ones made in this internationally renowned authority. Unfortunately, no comments were made by students.

Extending class work

A complaint that is commonplace among the pronunciation class students is the limited amount of time dedicated to the development of certain concepts which are difficult to grasp, namely accentuation in language use. Conversely, pronunciation teachers often complain about the little time students devote to revising and building upon these concepts out of class.

In the blog, three entries present content related to this particular topic. All three of them have the purpose of providing further exemplification on *Accentuation and usage* as presented by Finch and Ortiz Lira (1982). The aim of these entries is to complement in-class work by providing the students with the possibility of accessing authentic material. The examples range from real conversations to extracts from films. One of the posts expands on a lesson that had been taught some days before. Whereas some of the comments make explicit the fact that students found this particular entry a little involved, others show that there was no apparent difficulty understanding the most important aspects of the lesson and thank the instructor for doing directing the attention towards such aspects.

Students' opinions

In order to measure students' opinions about the edublog, a survey was administered. The questionnaire consisted of closed as well as open-ended questions. 85 students completed the survey, which represents 62% of the students who had enrolled in the course at the beginning of the academic year. Even though this might not seem a representative number of the student population, they represent 85.5% of the active population, i.e. the students who attended the course on a regular basis. Consequently, we believe that this is a considerable number of participants, and therefore a valid and representative number of respondents.

The first two questions inquired on the familiarity with blogging. The vast majority (98.8%) answered to Q1 by saying that they knew what a blog is, and for Q2, over half the students (50.6%) replied that they had visited between two and five blogs, while 41% of them admitted to having visited more than five.

The rest of the survey's questions focused on the implementation of this particular blog. Q3 asked about the students' familiarity with the blog, and 90.6% answered that they were aware of the availability of said blog. The fact that a minority did not know about its existence can be explained in that attendance to this subject's lessons is not compulsory.

Q4 was concerned with the frequency with which the students visited the blog. The results were: never: 27.1%; once: 16.5%; between two to five times: 32.9%; over five times: 23.5%. As it is made clear, the interest towards the contents of the blog is present in more than half of the class, which is a good indicative. Even though not many students interacted in the blog, many of them made it clear that this was not because of lack of interest, but rather because they were not so certain of how to participate or how to ask a question in the blog.

Q5 aimed at uncovering the reasons why 27.1% of the students had never used the tool. The most important reason was lack of time, and the second most important was that they did not know about the existence of the edublog. We consider this information of utmost importance, because it provides a scope for future action to be taken in the blog implementation.

Q6 consisted of a list of pre-set categories for students to provide their evaluation of the blog. The most salient results show that: 67.1% of the respondents found the blog useful; 56.5% qualified the entries as interesting; and nearly 50% expressed the accessibility of the blog format and the vocabulary. These findings are rather stimulating, and encourage us to keep on working with and improving this kind of tools.

Q7 consisted of an open-ended question in which the participants expressed their opinion as to the most and least useful aspects of the blog. The results are presented in the following table:

Most useful	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Analysis of intonation choices	13	19.7	19.7
Online discussion and interaction with teacher and peers	11	16.7	36.4
General positive appreciation (usefulness, immediacy of replies from teachers and classmates, etc.)	10	15.2	51.6
Links to external sources and references (standalone page)	9	13.7	65.3
Out-of-class work and teacher support	6	9.1	74.4
Posts in general (content, topic, length, etc)	6	9.1	83.5
Specific posts	4	6	89.5
Word stress (standalone page)	3	4.5	94
Least useful	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
External sources (Youtube video)	1	1.5	95.5
Specific posts	1	1.5	97
Non-embeddedness into a VLE	1	1.5	98.5
Excessive content	1	1.5	100
Sum Total	66	100	100

The following two questions (Q8 and Q9) were on the frequency and the content the students considered was practical or viable for the purposes of the subject. The general consideration showed that nearly 50% would prefer weekly entries, and that over 50% agreed that it should not only offer practice but also theory related to pronunciation and, in some cases, topics which were not necessarily specific to the topic under discussion.

The last item (Q10) was again an open-ended question asking whether the participants considered the use of a blog to be beneficial for P&PI, and to expand on the reasons for their choice. An overwhelming majority (89.4%) believed a blog can contribute to learning pronunciation. Concerning the reasons given, the major emerging categories were established and are presented in frequency-based ranking order as follows:

1. Facilitated interaction with teacher and peers
2. Clarification of questions by the teacher
3. Extension of class work and out-of-class practice
4. Easy access to course-related materials
5. Links to audio and video materials
6. Compensation for the few hours' weekly course load

Concluding remarks

The developments in technology and science have helped redefine the roles in both the private and public domains. As it is expected, these advances impinge upon educational spheres and therefore, the roles of instructors as transmitter of knowledge and of students as receivers of it are challenge. Along these lines, students are viewed as “creator[s] of knowledge and meaning through their interaction with one another, their environment and with teachers”, and instructors, in turn, take the roles of “coaches, facilitators or even partners with learners in the learning process (Granić, Ćukušić, Tzanavari & Papadopoulos, 2010, p. 261).

In this restructuring, ICTs have a crucial impact since they provide the framework for progress. Internet tools lend themselves to the implementation of constructivist approaches to education. Blogs, in particular, specifically, can advance the sort of communication that is viewed as beneficial in instructive settings nowadays. As for the blog used in P&PI, it has proved to be an effective tool in helping articulate both practice and theory. It has also encouraged participation anytime and anywhere. The work presented here is an exploratory study that can be taken as point of reference for future research and a framework against which blogging can be further moved forward.

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