



## Learning Spanish through blogging. Application of ICT to language learning and teaching at Reykjavík University

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### Abstract

*This paper describes the application of ICT to language learning and teaching at Reykjavík University (RU) and how new technological resources are implemented to give the students the possibility of developing ICT skills that will be necessary for their professional future. With special emphasis on the new social platforms the use of new technologies in language programs means to bring the real world into the courses in order to connect them with other learning communities. This is especially important for isolated and small countries like Iceland, where the opportunities for students to practice their language skills with native speakers or other students are very limited. The results of a recent study will be presented reporting the attitudes of students in a Business Spanish course at RU towards the use of Weblogs in the classroom as a learning and assessment tool. Results obtained from a questionnaire administered at the end of the course to know students opinions and perceptions after creating collectively a class blog during spring semester 2009. This study also addresses if the level of accuracy these students achieve is related to the fact that their comments and thoughts can be read and shared with other students. A consideration about Weblogs, as a collaborative asynchrony tool, providing autonomy to the student's learning process will be offered. Finally, this paper will analyze the potential of the Weblogs as a pedagogic tool for collaboration online in international projects.*

### Introduction

The vast majority (92%) of Icelandic households have a computer and 88% have access to the Internet [1]. All schools in Iceland are connected to the Internet and offer access to computers. This gives the schools at all levels the possibility to implement and develop information and communication technology (ICT) into educational settings. The development in Iceland has been fast, all universities are using learning management systems (LMS) to login and the use of online resources has become a normal part of everyday university life. The number of distance students has grown [2] and teachers are getting more and more familiar with new opportunities to support teaching and learning with the help of technology. Among the opportunities new technology has brought to schools is Weblogs. One of its biggest potentials is the ability to create space where students can collaborate and communicate with each other online. The Read/Write Web opens up all sorts of new possibilities for students to learn from each other as well as from the teacher. According to Richardson [3] "*blogs are made of reflections and conversations updated every day (if not a couple of times a day). They engage readers with ideas and questions and links. They ask readers to think and to respond. They demand interaction. Blogs are a collaborative space, as readers*

*become part of the writing and learning process*" (p. 47). This relates especially to language teaching and learning where the opportunity to collaborate and communicate is an important factor for success. The blog, as an asynchronous tool, has contributed to change the school situation, not only in distance education but also in blended education. Students can keep on working and collaborating even if they are for some reason or another not able to attend class, they just need an internet connection. The Weblog is a democratic tool that supports different learning styles, so for those students who might be more reluctant to express their ideas in front of the class, a blog gives them the opportunity to share in writing the ideas they may be too shy to talk about [3].

## 1. Weblog in Spanish teaching

The levels of the Spanish courses at RU are from A2 to B2 according to the *European Framework of Reference for Languages*. The teaching context is a non Spanish native speaking country with a very small population, where the chances for the students to practice their Spanish are very limited and they get most of the practice from class work. The students are mainly business students but also law, computer science, engineering, health and education students. The syllabus is designed as a Spanish Course for Professional Purposes. As the students belong to different schools the timetable has created a problem for some students and affects their possibility to attend classes. Sometimes, despite of the fact that they want to keep on practicing and studying, they give up as they find it hard to follow the course work.

As a solution to this problem a change was made in the courses' schedules from on campus learning to blended learning. Once a week the students come to class where the focus is on practicing oral skills and keeping personal contact with the students, which is considered important. Taking into account the fact that all of them, as most of the Icelandic population, can access the internet, it was decided to use online features in order to practice writing, reading and to support communication. The aim was that the students could communicate in virtual space with a real audience and with a real purpose, as learning a language implies a deep social process [4]. Blogs are believed to be a good tool to reach this goal and the most positive aspect is that they give the opportunity to create a "*Spanish environment*" where the students can express themselves in Spanish. The groups' blog in the Business Spanish courses could be described as a collaborative space created for and by the students at Reykjavík University.

The class blog was set up at Blogger.com, which is owned by Google and hosts the Weblog for free. It is also one of the easiest to use and it has some levels of privacy that are important for a class blog. It was also a more realistic and genuine option than the LMS used at RU, which is more similar to a "closed garden" [5]. Students and teachers can stay connected through the course blog where a dialogue about different issues can be established and the students feel more autonomous and that they are more in control of their own learning process. Another benefit of applying an open platform to the classroom is that it will help to develop the students ICT skills as they will learn how to manage a weblog which includes publishing, downloading pictures, adding links to other interesting web pages using hyperlinks etc. and they will be ready to repeat the experience outside the academic environment. Figure 1 shows the blog environment at RU.

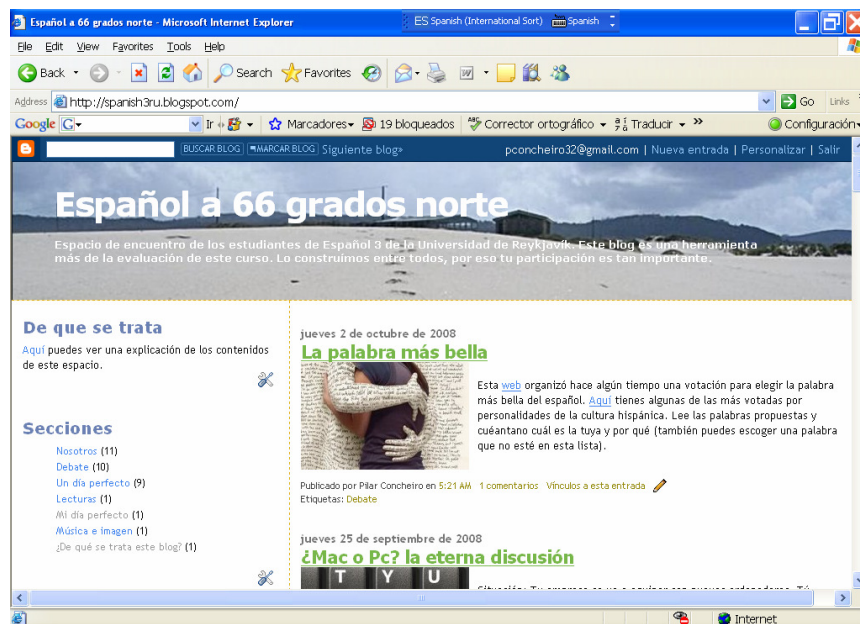


Figure 1. The Spanish III Blog.

The class blog was divided into five sections: *Nosotros*, where the students introduce themselves, *Lecturas*: a reading section with updated news and economy articles; *Debate*, where the students express their opinions about some socio-cultural issues as “10 tips for a business meeting in Madrid”, “Spanish cultural stereotypes you have to avoid” or “how to start an export/import business between Spain and Iceland: useful tips and reliable sources to find information on the net”; *Escucha la noticia*, with short films, songs, publicity adverts etc. are included in this audiovisual section where they are also required to leave a comment; *Sugerencias*, where the students decide the content of the section themselves by including links to resources, news..... anything they consider being useful for the course. Apart from these sections, links to online resources as dictionaries, grammar exercises, and a glossary for business terms are selected and included to help the students and to promote a more autonomous learning process. An anonymous survey which is one of the many applications offered by Blogger.com about different aspects of their learning process was administered periodically.

The contents used in the blog, e.g. articles, news, resources, images, were all updated, so using an IT-communication tool and applying it to the learning context meant bringing the real world to the courses. In order to make the students participate it is really important that we as teachers select topics and issues that are interesting for the students or related to their professional carrier. Consequently as the majority of the students come for the School of Business, the Reader and the Debate sections of the blog focused on economy issues and news as a way to give a context and practice vocabulary and expressions related to their professional sector. The teacher is the administrator of the blog and subscribes the students, who have previously registered with a gmail account. One fifth of the coursework material came from the blog. The students have to do different weekly tasks in the blog by creating an entry and participating by reading and making comments to their classmates’ entries. The writing of the entries was always corrected by the teacher (in a different colour) but never the comments because they were made spontaneously and the teachers did not want to break the communication by making them feel too concerned about their correctness when expressing themselves in Spanish.

The students realised that their collaboration and participation was absolutely necessary and that sense of responsibility helped them to be more autonomous in their learning process. They interacted with each other through their comments asking for explanations of words they did not know, for more information

about their lives, introducing new contents and links to other interesting pages through hyperlinks or simply expressing their agreement or disagreement.

Different blogs were used for each language course during the same period of time and they were connected. So, students from different courses and levels could interact and learn from each other, making our Spanish virtual world bigger.

## 2. Survey method

In this paper a paper and pencil survey conducted in a Spanish course at RU during the spring semester 2009 will be described. In this course a class blog was a part of the learning material and the group chosen for this study consisted of 16 students, 15 from Iceland and one from Ukraine. The response rate was 100%. Females were 10 (63%) of the participants and males 6 (37%). A questionnaire was designed especially for this survey. It consisted of 12 closed questions and was rated on a five point Likert scale. In this paper three out of the 12 questions are included, as they are the most relevant ones for the topic of this paper. In the end there was an open question asking the participants about their opinions on distance education. The study was anonymous and there was no possibility of tracing individual answers.

## 3. Results

Only two of the 16 students had previously used blog in an academic context. Meanwhile, in their personal life, all admitted to have a previous experience with blogs: seven students were using their own blog and nine had participated actively in blogs of others. Table 1 shows that the majority of the students agreed that communication with other students helped them to learn, the blog made them to put more effort in their writing and most of them preferred to use the blog.

**Table 1. The students' attitudes toward blog.**

	Agree N (%)	Neutral N (%)	Disagree N (%)
Does reading the comments and entries of your peers on the blog helped you to learn and to improve your own writing?	15 (94)	1 (6)	0 (0)
When I write on the blog, I put a greater effort in my writing as other students can see what I have made public there?	15 (94)	1 (6)	0 (0)
Do you prefer to practice your writing in the blog rather than to deliver essays to the teacher?	13 (87)	0 (0)	2 (13)

When asked what they considered the most positive feature of blog for their learning process, 12 (75%) said that being able to read the comments of his or her fellow students was useful in improving their own writing but also to learn more of their classmates' opinions on various topics. Other answers were: useful for learning vocabulary, encourages reflection on current issues, is a more entertaining way to practice writing in Spanish, I can work at my own pace and connect from anywhere.

It was considered important to assess whether the experience had been positive, therefore, the students were asked if they would like to continue using the classroom blog as a tool in learning Spanish and 14 (88%) responded positively.

## Conclusion

The learning process in a course that integrates blog is less focused on the teacher and more on the students who do not expect the teacher to give them all the information. By reading and commenting on others entries, they start to learn from each other without the teacher being too directly involved. This helps the students to be more critical and analytical in their study without waiting for the teacher's opinion. They are not just readers and writers they are editors and collaborators as well. They create and construct their own knowledge, becoming more autonomous learners [6]. From the linguistic point of view, it is important to mention that students learn from each other because, after reading their classmates' entries and comments, they end up adding structures and new words that have been used by others. It must be taken into account that using a group weblog will also contribute to develop the students' social skills (i.e. communication and group work) that will have an important value on their future and professional careers. The survey and the teachers experience of lecturing and guiding the students have made it possible to observe their attitudes and reactions towards the use of weblogs as a part of their Spanish course. It is important to note that the students' participation in the blog, except in a few cases, was extremely positive and has contributed to create a context where students have interacted with each other and built their own virtual space in Spanish.

We must keep in mind that this learning environment can be easily extended to other countries: blog designed by students in one country can be opened and linked to students from another country and that would increase the value of the experience from the intercultural point of view. We as teachers should accept the challenge of applying the new technologies to our courses in order to adapt ourselves to this new social change characterized by the global communication through the net.

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