

Implementing Blogs in Post-Graduate English Language Learning for Academic Purposes

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Abstract. The paper sheds the light upon the practice and results of implementing blogs in the post-graduate English language learning for academic purposes. To achieve the aim of the study the following objectives were settled: a) to analyze recent publications concerning blogs in learning; b) to discriminate main tendencies and strategies of implementing and practicing blogging for teaching English as a foreign language and its dimensions for different purposes; c) to elaborate a strategy of implementing blogging as a learning activity in a frame of the university course English for Academic Purposes for post-graduate students in Ukraine regarding curriculum requirements and expectations on the postgraduates after their taking the course; d) to implement blogging in the real classroom setting within the course “English for Academic Purposes”; e) to analyze the observations and teaching/learning practice, and to discriminate social, psychological and other factors which determined strategies of using blogs in post-graduate English language learning for academic purposes; f) to provide recommendations on effective blog implementation in English language learning. The conclusions drawn out state benefits and limitations imposed by Blogger as the teaching and learning instrument as well as the recommendations on its effective exploitation for learning English as a foreign language for academic purposes.

1. Introduction

In a view of the worldwide experience of implementing ICT and social media in learning, an urgent question is about strategies and practices of using blogs and blogging in the formal settings of the university learning.

Analyzing numerous cases of teaching with blogs and being aware of huge didactic and communicative potential of blogs as teaching and learning instruments, the research has its aim to experiment with blogging activities as a component of the course “English for Academic Purposes” taken by the post-graduate students in Ukraine.

As the learning processes are in most cases predominated by socio-cultural peculiarities of the learning community, it was also important to find out how Ukrainian post-graduate students would use blogs in their English language learning for academic purposes, to analyze their strategies in their blogging for learning, and to study their attitudes to such a kind of activity in formal learning.

The case study allows describing the practice of implementing blogs in formal post-graduate learning of English for Academic Purposes, discriminating strategies appropriate for teaching and

learning English with blogs, and defining factors influential for the students' learning and communicative behavior in the virtual space and in the classroom.

2. Methodology of the Study

2.1 Recent investigations in implementing social media and blogs in learning

As it is known a blog, short for web log, is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible location for discussing a topic or issue [1]. In a traditional view blogs are set up and maintained individually, but nowadays it is possible to discriminate different types of blogs [2]. Among them are personal individual blogs with an allowed access for a limited number of readers, individual blogs for public reading that are often established with professional or advertising purposes, etc. The content or use of a blog is the choice of the author and may include news, updates, articles, and reflections.

Analysis of the literature focusing on blogs and specifics of their functioning allows discriminating several vectors of studying blogs as web based communication tools.

1. Resources and publications defining the notion of the blog, the derivation of the term itself and history of development blogging as a tool for communication and then a social phenomenon [2, 3, 4].
2. Resources with recommendations how to set up a blog, maintain it and make it attractive for readers [4]. Such Internet publications are practical by their character, they provide concrete instructions and steps in the process of establishing a blog, its upgrading, revision and other activities aimed to make the blog functional [5].
3. Publications dwelling upon specifics of blogs in certain spheres of social life and Internet communities, those are journalism, business, librarianship, learning and education [2].
4. Resources describing advantages of implementing blogs in learning based on such properties of blogs as integrity and interactivity [2, 3].
5. Articles laying out descriptions and results of case studies of implementing blogs in different educational settings [6], but they are still not numerous.

Discussing a blog as a web based communication tool first of all it is considered as a micro-publishing area [2] which contains news, personal evaluation of current events, sheds the light upon social and political processes from a certain angle of view. Blogs' capabilities to evoke communication and discussion allow developing a community that shares knowledge, ideas and values. In this respect blogs have already gained a fame of a tool influencing on the formation of the social opinion [2].

The capability to develop a community round an idea or certain knowledge has turned blogs into valuable tools for learning. In this respect blogs are viewed as tools for the promotion of deeper learning [2, 3]. Therefore, it has already come into a wide spread practice to set up individual and group blogs which are educational by its content and serve for certain learning purposes [2].

Regarding blogs' potential for learning and sharing knowledge, researchers describe blogs' educational advantages in the following terms.

1. A blog can function as a tool for reflection and evaluation [3].
2. A blog is an area for sharing creative works and original products for discussion and evaluation either by the peers or by people from aside [3, 4].
3. A blog creates conditions for interactivity and dialogue in learning [6].
4. A blog helps to develop a sense of the group belonging, relatedness and responsibility when working collaboratively at some problem [7].
5. A blog can be viewed as a tool for knowledge construction and its management [6, 7].

Together with publications devoted to the description of overall benefits of implementing blogs in education and strategies of establishing a blog and its maintaining, there are articles describing experience of dealing with blogs in different educational settings.

Thus, Hwan-Ik Yeo, Yekyung Lisa Lee explore the use of blogs for personal information

management as a learning tool that could bring increased efficiency and academic self-efficacy for carrying out learning tasks. Their study suggests that using individual blogs for personal information management can create personally meaningful contexts of learning for children [7].

Another case study is of special interest for the subject matter of the current research. Churchill explored the blog uses in the class of postgraduate students over the period of one semester within the course of the 'Master in Information Technology in Education'. In the experimental blog-based environment students were accessing course material, posting reflections, featuring artefacts created through the learning tasks, commenting on each other's contributions and otherwise participating on a regular basis throughout the semester. The experiment allowed the researcher to state that blogs can be effective educational technology and provide the following activities: reading blogs of others, receiving comments, previewing tasks of others and reading feedback received in relation to these. Through blogs a teacher can create an ambience in which students feel themselves to be important parts of the classroom community and that their needs and opinions are recognized and addressed [8].

2.2 Tendencies and strategies of implementing and practicing blogging for teaching English

Analysis of the resources presented in the web concerning blogs and blogging in language learning allowed discriminating the following tendencies.

Blogs and blogging are widely used first of all as repositories of language learning materials. At the same time language blogs provide the following opportunities: uploading free lessons and teaching materials; establishing and developing a language learning community where learners can converse, ask questions on the language issues, discuss controversial points of the language use; presenting personal experience of learning language; highlighting specifics of culture and mentality of societies where the language is used; presenting learning techniques and strategies to deal with the language; advertising language schools and courses [9].

As Godwin-Jones states, blogs are well suited to serve as on-line personal journals for language students, particularly since they normally enable uploading and linking of files [10]. Language learners can use a personal blog, linked to a course, as an electronic portfolio, showing development over time. By publishing the blog on the Internet, the student has the possibility of writing for readers beyond classmates, not usually possible in discussion forums. Readers in turn can comment on what they're read, although blogs can be placed in secured environments as well [10].

Ahluwalia studies students' perception of using Blogs as a means to supplement in-class language learning activities [11]. The following features of blogging activities make them a powerful curricular component for college-level English language classes: 1) offers worldwide readership which is far beyond the limits of the traditional classroom, 2) instant publishing on the Internet, 3) creating an e-portfolio of students' work, 4) interaction and peer review through comments.

3. Teaching Academic English to Post-Graduate Students with Blogging: Description of the Case Study

3.1 Outline of the Case Study: Aims and Methods

The study of the theory and teaching experience with blogs motivated conducting an experiment with blogging while teaching the course "English for Academic Purposes" for post-graduate students. As the specifics of any learning is determined by a number of factors ranging from global educational politics to a learner's personal experience in gaining knowledge it was important to find out how Ukrainian post-graduate students would use blogs in their English language learning for academic purposes, to analyze their strategies in their blogging for learning, and to study their attitudes to such a kind of activity in formal learning.

The aim of the study was realized in the following steps: 1) on the basis of the literature analysis

and the study of recent teaching practices to elaborate a strategy of implementing blogging as a learning activity in a frame of the course “English for Academic Purposes” for Ukrainian post-graduate students according to the requirements put forward to them after their taking the course; 2) to implement blogging in the classroom setting; 3) to analyze observations over teaching/learning processes, to discriminate social, psychological and other factors which determined strategies of using blogs by post-graduate students; 4) to provide recommendations on effective blog implementation in English language learning for academic purposes.

The aim and objectives of the research were achieved by the following methods: 1) recent publication analysis; 2) interview (pre-learning and post-learning interview with post-graduate students); 3) teaching experiment (teaching English for Academic Purposes with Blogger); 4) observation and self-observation (learning and teaching processes were observed as well as the participants’ behavior in the virtual space and its impact upon learning); 5) evaluation and self-evaluation (learning outcomes and teaching practices were evaluated, method of introspection and self-evaluation in teaching and experience of the virtual communication was implemented as well); 6) qualitative and quantitative data analysis (answers to questionnaires and interviews were processed and analyzed).

3.2 Content of the Course: Specifics of Teaching Academic English to Post-Graduate Students in Ukraine

To outline the content of the course “English for Academic Purposes” for post-graduate students and specifics of blog implementation into the logic of learning we should take a closer look at specifics of language learning at the Ukrainian universities [12]. Due to the educational standards bachelor students of non-linguistic departments learn a foreign language during their first two years of the university study. The average foreign language learning download is about 2-4 hours per week and 3 – 4 credits of the overall volume according ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). In the end of the course students take a final examination. Passing an exam in a foreign language is a compulsory requirement for those applying for the master program. Most master degree programs contain a course of a foreign language as well. According to the European Recommendations to the Language Education bachelor students are expected to reach B2 level of the language proficiency (an independent user), while master students must be able to demonstrate the native-like proficiency (C1 level) [13].

Applicants for the post-graduate program take an entrance exam in a foreign language, and have a compulsory course of a foreign language. At the end of the course they are required to take an examination in a foreign language, without which no PhD dissertation defense is permitted.

The content of teaching a foreign language at the post-graduate level is determined by the requirements that are put forward to post-graduate students after their graduation and in their future academic career. Thus, each member of the academic staff is required to have sound knowledge of at least one foreign language at a level which would enable him/her: to read and to understand the FL literature in his/her professional domain; to write articles for submission them to professional and scientific journals in the field of his/her specialization; to prepare research results to contribute to conference proceedings, technical and scientific conferences; to process expert opinions to prepare publications and other scientific works; to create computer presentations for conferences and seminars; to participate actively at conferences and seminars on the topic prepared; to be engaged in discussions at conferences and seminars; to prepare study materials for students in a FL; to conduct formal and informal discussions when dealing with peers from abroad; to conduct formal and informal discussions during negotiations; to be able to speak a FL via Internet tools of communication synchronously and asynchronously [12].

Therefore, when outlining the content of the course “English for Academic Purposes” enriched with blog activities all those aspects were taken into account, and it determined the strategies of the language learning enhanced with blogging.

3.3 Participants

The learning group consisted of 25 post-graduate students, learning to obtain PhD degrees in different branches of science. Among them are Energy, Computer Technologies, etc.

The initial level of their competence in English varied significantly from low to high, as well as their abilities to express themselves in English.

The character of the group determined the priorities in learning, strategies and subjects to discuss within the course.

First of all, there was a target to develop their skills in speaking as on general topics so on those within their professional domain. As well they were expected to be able to comprehend extended texts on issues concerning their research area, evaluate the information and express their opinion.

Secondly, regarding the fact that the students' scientific areas were quite different but they were required to develop language skills within their professional domains, the topics under discussion included those from life situations, general scientific issues, linguistic tips on Academic English, specific professional issues as presentations to the students from other research areas.

Third, the learning process was designed in a way that each student regardless his/her initial English language competence have a possibility to participate actively in the learning activities and to continue the development of his/her language competence in their own pace.

3.4 Learning Setting and Procedures

The total volume of the course was 36 hours of classroom learning (2 hour class per week during one term) and about 90 hours of learning on their own (homework assignments, self-learning, etc.). Therefore, the aim was first of all to provide continuity for their learning, i.e. to settle such learning conditions in which students would deal with the language not only at the class and in the noon of the class by preparing some home assignments, but they should be involved in coping with the language during the whole week between classroom sessions.

Blogger was chosen as a web based communication tool to set up a group blog [14] that was aimed to enhance traditional learning and assist in achieving learning goals (Fig. 1).

The screenshot shows a Blogger blog page with the following content:

- Title:** English For Professional and Academic Purposes
- Date:** SATURDAY, MAY 4, 2013
- Post Title:** English language
- Post Content:**

English is a West Germanic language that was first spoken in early medieval England and is now the most widely used language in the world. It is spoken as a first language by the majority populations of several sovereign states, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and a number of Caribbean nations. It is the third-most-common native language in the world, after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. It is widely learned as a second language and is an official language of the European Union, many Commonwealth countries and the United Nations, as well as in many world organisations.

English arose in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England and what is now southeast Scotland. Following the extensive influence of Great Britain and the United Kingdom from the 17th century to the mid-20th century, through the British Empire, and also of the United States since the mid-20th century, it has been widely propagated around the world, becoming the leading language of international discourse and the lingua franca in many regions.

Historically, English originated from the fusion of closely related dialects, now collectively termed Old English, which were brought to the eastern coast of Great Britain by Germanic settlers (Anglo-Saxons) by the 5th century – with the word English being derived from the name of the Angles, and ultimately from their ancestral region of Angeln (in what is now Schleswig-Holstein). A significant number of English words are constructed on the basis of roots from Latin, because Latin in some form was the lingua franca of the Christian Church and of European intellectual life. The language was further influenced by the Old Norse language because of Viking invasions in the 9th and 10th centuries.

The Norman conquest of England in the 11th century gave rise to heavy borrowings from
- Followers:** 7 members listed, including Daniel NeSkagy, Iryna Sekret, and others.
- Contributors:** Константин, Unknoun, Daniel NeSkagy, Iryna Sekret, Виталий Лазорчик, Darya Loboiko, Zhenuya T., Efim R, Vlad Aksjonov, Анна Казанцева, Gena Garpich, Юлия Котенко.
- Blog Archive:** 2013 (52) posts, May (6) posts, including 'English language', 'Autodesk 3ds Max', '3D modeling', 'Wikipedia has a problem with women.', 'Origami', and 'Time Again for Repayable Taxes?'.

Fig. 1. One of the pages of the blog with some of their contributors, members and list of previously discussed topics

Blogging activities were conducted by the learning participants on their own out of the classroom. The classroom time was devoted to setting tasks and goals, discussion of the topics initiated in the blog, presentations and their discussion, explaining language issues which were required for certain tasks and activities.

The activities conducted in the group blog are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Learning Activities in the Group Blog

	Instructor	Students
Administrating the blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - setting up the blog - inviting students to participate in blogging - determining the level of the blog's openness to outer societies - defining roles of students in blogging (administrators, active writers, readers) - initiating topics of discusiion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - suggesting students and people to be invited to the group blog; - sharing organizational information among groupmates
Learning Content Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - writing texts in the blog on the topics of discussion - providing links to other resources to prove or develop the topic; - commenting on the students' postings; - putting questions to check the comprehension of the videos and texts posted; - discussing and evaluating classroom activities; - putting tasks either for individual or group performance; - evaluating one's performance; - inviting to express opinions, evaluate, etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - posting their own texts; - reposting texts from other resources; - posting videos; - commenting upon others' posts; - posting reflection writings on the topics initiated either in the classroom or in the blog; - commenting on the classroom activities; - posting videos created by themselves; - presenting picutres from their personal life and leisure activities; - evaluating each other performance, etc

4. Results and their Discussion

Results of the learning enhanced by blogging can be grouped around three main points: 1) instructors' observations over the students' behavior in classroom and virtual space, their involvement in the learning activities; 2) objective evaluation of the learning outcomes i.e. their progress in Academic English evaluated at the formal final exam; 3) the students' evaluation of their learning with the group blogs; 4) reflections on Blogger as a learning tool.

4.1 Observations over the students' behavior in classroom and virtual space, their involvement in the learning activities

It should be noted that the students' behavior at first classroom sessions in its full extent reflected their self-evaluation in English, which was determined by their previous language learning experience. But apart from objective gaps in knowledge and skills, their self-evaluation was much lower than what they were factually able to do. As the result, they felt unconfident to respond and speak English referring to their inability to express their thoughts by means of the language learned.

Gradually their behavior changed as well as their self-evaluation. All the students participated in the classroom activities to the extent of their optimized and activated skills and abilities. It was achieved by the following strategies:

1. *Teaching strategies.* Encouraging students to respond in any possible way, starting from separate words, phrases, sentences, short texts, prepared speeches and presentations, spontaneous utterances, participation in discussions.

2. *Blogging.* The students, who were unconfident to speak in the classroom, began to express their thoughts in a written form as comments to the posts, prepared essays to discuss certain topics

in the blog and then to be ready to speak in the classroom. After reading other students' posts they were prepared for discussion as being equipped with necessary vocabulary and phrases, or at least able to follow the discussion that went on in the classroom.

3. *Psychological strategies.* Having extended background in the language learning, students continued to feel unconfident being afraid to make mistakes or sound wrongly. Therefore, it was essential to encourage and support them by eliciting their knowledge and skills, and showing the way how those instruments for expressing their thoughts.

4.2 Evaluation of the students' competence in Academic English

The students, who participated actively in the blog fulfilling the role of active writers (49 %), demonstrated high performance at the final exam, which they had to take after finishing the course and as a compulsory requirement for passing PhD program. They got the highest grades and were marked by the examination board as confident users of Academic English able to dwell on the topics of their research, answer the questions and prove their point of view on the issues concerning their investigations. At the same time it must be noted that initially half of them demonstrated lack of confidence and were not sure to use English for speaking at all, insisting that they did not have enough knowledge and skills to do it.

The rest of the learners progressed significantly in reading comprehension, writing essays on the academic and scientific issues, dealing with Internet tools that can assist in processing information and Internet scientific resources in English. Those skills turned out to be valuable for their learning, broadening their professional and research outlook. They demonstrated good performance at the final exam.

4.3 Students' evaluation of blogging in learning

Evaluating the students' learning performance with blogging it should be noted that they had had no previous experience of dealing either with Blogger or writing in blogs. At the same time before the experiment all of the students admitted that learning with Internet can be beneficial. They had extended experience of using some social media for personal purposes (VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook), exploiting web resources for learning and research, etc.

Survey on the students' learning experience and attitudes to blogging as a learning tool after the case study allowed finding out following evaluations: 1) blogging was beneficial for their language learning (100%); 2) learning became much more interesting and exciting (100%); 3) blogging motivated them to learn more and to be more involved into learning (75%); 4) it allowed being exposed to different Internet resources and dealing with texts of different modes of presentation (80%); 5) sharing in the group blogs allowed finding out about each other research interests and broadening their professional outlook (100%); 6) it allowed possibilities for creativity – presenting their works in videos and other modes (100%); 7) it extended content of learning and diversified learning activities (75%); 8) every member of the group became immediately informed about updates in the blog by Google messages (100%).

At the same time there were some negative responds that were caused by some technical aspects of Blogger and behaviors of peers in the group blog. They are as follows: 1) it was difficult to cope with options of Blogger and to find out at once how to manage the blog (60%); 2) reposting huge texts was overburdening the blog and made it hard for other students to process the information properly (45%); 3) students preferred their peers to write their own thoughts and impressions not just posting texts from other sources (25%); 4) it was difficult to tune synchronous web-mediated communication via Blogger or Google though such an urge appeared from time to time when the discussion was likely to go beyond the limits of asynchronous communication in Blogger (10%); 5) writings and essays of the students with low language abilities were extended and detailed, and

looked too perfect in comparison to their performance in the classroom (15%).

Eventually the last case evoked even a burst of negative emotions and evaluations among some students, regarding their peers' performance in the group. Simultaneously it was a good indication of the students' genuine involvement in learning, care about joint work of the group, sincere interest in each other performance and learning progress. Such reaction from the peers found out to be a powerful instrument to prevent plagiarism and to work at the extreme of one's own skills and abilities.

4.4 Reflections on Blogger as a learning tool

Together with positive and negative features of blogging and Blogger defined by other researchers and the students in their experimental learning, the following should be added as well: 1) in spite of certain difficulties in dealing with Blogger which may be natural when one faces a new instrument it should be noted that it is quite easy to be used for setting up a blog, its maintenance and implementation in traditional learning; 2) it allows connecting the content of the blog with other social media and Internet resources; 3) Blogger provides possibilities for tracing the involvement of each student in the work as by their posting so by their viewing posts too; 4) it allows discriminating which topics evoke more interest from the students to discuss (Fig.2) as well as which audience got interested in the blog and participated as readers (Fig.3); 5) by Blogger it is possible to see in which periods of time between classes students become more active in blogging (Fig.4); 6) as blogging activities were done by the students out of the classroom so it allowed to make their self-learning more organized, transparent and directed.



Fig. 2. Rate of the topics discussed in the blog

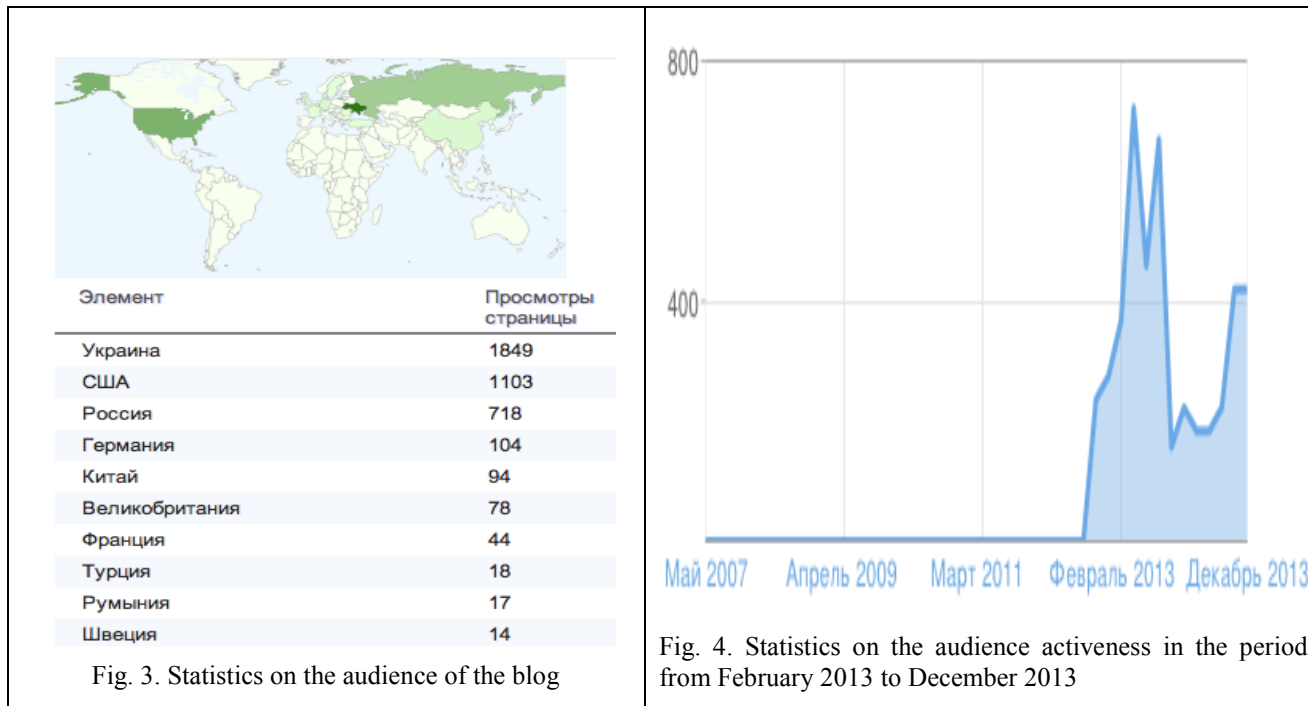


Fig. 3. Statistics on the audience of the blog

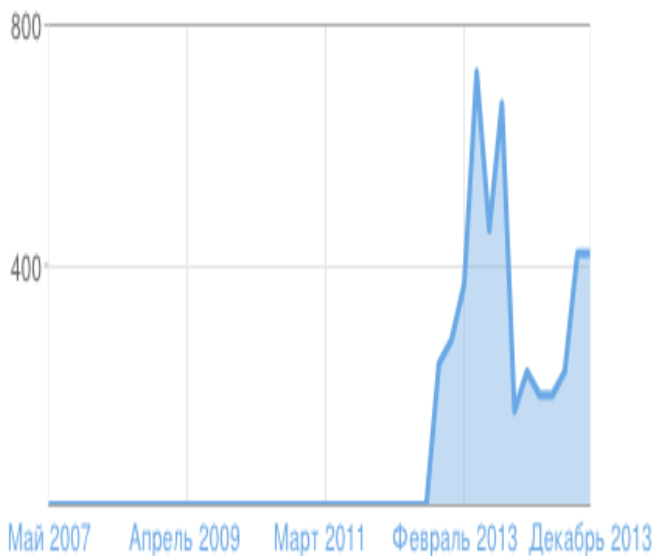


Fig. 4. Statistics on the audience activeness in the period from February 2013 to December 2013

5. Conclusion

Overviewing the experience of teaching with blogs, observations and evaluations obtained it can be concluded that blogging, namely a group blog, can be effectively implemented in the frame of formal traditional learning. It helps to diversify learning activities, make learning more creative, interactive allowing students to feel more freedom in the learning. As the result they feel more motivated and involved in the group work. Among the factors that determine students' strategies of dealing with the blog in learning it is essential to discriminate the following:

1. *Social factors.* It is important to take into account students' previous experience of dealing with technology and web-based communication tools. More known and recognized tools in a certain community are likely to be implemented with an ease regarding their familiarity on technical options, their attachment to the familiar resources, people and communities well-known to the students.

Another crucial factor concerns norms and requirements of the society and institutions where learning occurs. It may be regarded as a non-proper form of the learning communication and one which is not valid in terms of evaluation of the learning outcomes. Therefore, it may be advisable to use such tools of learning to enhance traditional forms of communication as for its interactivity, sustainability and transparency of learning.

2. *Psychological factors.* The students' involvement and active participation in activities mediated by Internet are directly determined by their previous experience of learning and their age. The younger the students the more dependent they may feel upon the teacher and unconfident to take independent steps in learning.

As practice and other observations show, presenting oneself in the web communication requires a certain degree of confidence about soundness of one's thoughts and ideas to be expressed openly. At the same time students who feel at ease with technologies and Internet tools are likely to be more flexible in methods and strategies of learning, more open to new learning experience.

Implementing blogging in this case study found out to be a powerful motivating tool for students to be persistent and systematic in their language learning, expressing genuine interest in the content of learning and activities occurring in the classroom and outside. They were likely to take more responsibilities for their learning, putting out ideas on enhancing the language learning and group collaboration.

3. *Technological factors.* Blogger is eventually found out to be quite easy to deal with for learning purposes. It can be used in any modes of learning as an additional tool and as an area of sharing ideas, thoughts, and works that help to unite a learning group and to make learning more interactive and collaborative. The tool is advisable for asynchronous communication, while to satisfy needs for synchronous communication for learning purposes additional instruments should be involved.

Main recommendations on effective implementation of blogging in formal language learning based on the obtained experience include the following: 1) to take into consideration general policy of the institution where the learning occurs, requirements of the course and program of the students' training; 2) to allot time for blogging which is claimed to be for the students' self-learning or self-training, i.e. to allow them to perform in their own pace and in convenient time to feel free to be more creative; at the same time some classroom hours can be devoted to some activities with blogs especially at the initial stages when students may feel unsure about dealing with the blog; 3) to plan the course regarding the activities with the blog to make them reasonable and purposeful; 4) for the instructor who is setting the blog it is advisable to spend some time to be confident about technical issues and options of the tool as Blogger in the given case; 5) to maintain students' motivation to perform and to be active writers the instructor should react to each post and comment positively and in encouraging way; 6) if any comment or a post goes against the main policy of the learning or the group it is better to say it to the student face-to-face, and discuss the problem which evoked negative reactions in the group in order to find an acceptable solution.

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