

# Blogging and Vietnamese Language Teaching and Learning

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## Abstract

Compared with other web tools, blogging has sparked much interest among language educators for its authentic, interesting and communicative nature. The teaching of Vietnamese as a foreign language is relatively under-researched, particularly when it comes to the application of information and communication technologies. This ongoing action research study examines the usefulness of a blog project in developing Vietnamese as a foreign language (VFL) students' reading and writing skills as well as their background knowledge of the Vietnamese culture. Pedagogical implications of the use of blogs in foreign language teaching are also discussed. Data were collected from twenty-two VFL learners through their blog projects, two sets of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This article focuses on three major points: the background of the blog project; the students' feedback on the project; and the teacher's reflections on the advantages and challenges of this project. Some recommendations are also put forward to make the best use of this powerful web tool in foreign language classrooms.

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## 1 Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has increasingly played a major role in education and has been recently incorporated in language teaching. Teachers and students alike in many parts of the world have embraced different tools that ICT has to offer to enhance their language teaching and learning experiences. Among other Web tools, blog has been used frequently in foreign language classrooms for its authentic, interesting and communicative nature. A growing body of literature on the use of blogs in teaching languages, especially English, shows important pedagogical implications of blogging. However, Vietnamese is still an under-researched language. There is no research to date on using blogs to teach Vietnamese as a foreign language (VFL). Therefore, in this article, the author would like to share some findings from her qualitative action research study with two primary aims:

- To help students have more exposure to the Vietnamese language
- To contribute to the existing literature on blogs and foreign language teaching with findings from an under-researched language

In the following sections, I am going to review the literature on blogging and language teaching. In addition I will explain my perception of learning goals, and through that explain why I chose this project for my class. I will also provide a description of the project, some findings from the project, and some concluding remarks.

## 2 Literature review

Since the term was coined by Barger in 1997 (Paquet, 2003), blog (shortened form of ‘log of the web’ has gone through tremendous growth and has probably become the most popular among second-generation web tools. Weblog, or blog for short, is used as both a noun and a verb. Although it appears like a normal web page, a blog is more interactive than a website, because it enables its readers to comment on each entry. According to Paquet (2003), there are five features of blogs: personal editorship, hyperlink post structure, frequent updates, content displayed in reverse chronological order, free public access to the content and archival features. Since blogs are very user-friendly and easy to maintain, these five features make blogging even more attractive to language educators and language learners alike.

However, in order to choose the most appropriate tool for our language teaching, we should first of all look at Chapelle’s (2002) principles for CALL pedagogues (cited in Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma 2007) as follows: language learning potential, learner fit, meaning focus, authenticity, positive impact, and practicality. When choosing any CALL application for our own classroom, a teacher should examine how the tool fits with the CALL principles in general. In the case of blogging, we should pay particular attention to blogging pedagogy. According to Richardson (2006), weblog’s pedagogical values can be seen in it being a constructivist tool for learning, its expansion of the classroom walls, its archival capabilities for teaching and learning material, etc. Therefore, blogs have been increasingly embraced in education. In English as a Second Language (ESL) context, Campbell (2003) identifies three types of blogs: the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog.

### 2.1 *Blogs as a constructivist learning tool*

In their discussion on the Cognitive Sciences from theory into practice, Bednar, Cunnigham, Duffy and Perry (1992) note that from the constructivist view, learning is a constructive process and an active process. It is in the constructive process that “the learner is building an internal representation of knowledge, a personal interpretation of experience” (p. 21). In their words, learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience. Bednar et al. also specify the context for constructivist learning to occur: “Learning must be situated in a rich context, reflective of real-world contexts for this constructive process to occur and transfer to environments beyond the school or training classroom.” (p. 22) Other researchers also show that constructivism has considerable implications for the design of instructional materials (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992).

With regards to online constructive learning, Seitzinger (2006) postulates seven key components as follows: problem-based learning, learner-centeredness, collaborative learning, social presence, interactivity, support and cognitive tools. In her analysis, blogs can be an effective constructive learning tool for a number of reasons: a tool for reflection and a measure of authenticity to learning tasks, collaborative construction of knowledge, and comments being a powerful feedback tool which promotes active learning.

### 2.2 *Blogs and language classes*

Blogging is found to positively enhance the teaching and learning of language (Huann, John & Yuen). Its benefits in language classes have been discussed and supported by a number of authors. For example, Kavaliauskiene, Anusiene and Mazeikiene (2006) hold that blogging has advantages of instant online publishing, having readership, providing additional reading practice, creating an online portfolio of student written work. In addition, Huann et al. also state that “scaffolding of the meaning making process carried out through commenting can further enhance learning.” (p. 3)

However, despite these benefits, the use of blogs for teaching also presents several drawbacks that teachers should pay attention to such as privacy setting, unwanted comments from other Internet users. Also, blogging lacks the continuous and spontaneous interaction that face to face

communication has; therefore, it is not very useful in helping students practice skills such as speaking and listening.

To date, most of the empirical research on blogging focuses on English language classes. A number of studies have been conducted to examine the effects of blogging on students' writing skills (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Wu, 2005), on teaching ESP reading and writing (Arani, 2005), on learner independence (Pinkman, 2005), and on intercultural learning and improving linguistic competence (Carney). Furthermore, blogging has also been used as a tool of reflection on learning for students (Mynard, 2007).

As noted, since blogging is a relatively new web tool, the literature on blogging and foreign language teaching is still very scarce. There is even less documented research on Asian languages. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is no information to date on blogging and Vietnamese language teaching. Therefore, I hope that this action research study can contribute to the existing literature on blogs and VFL teaching and learning.

### **3 Learning goals**

As a teacher, I am fully aware that clearly-defined learning goals can help teachers and students achieve their course objectives. In this course the learning goals are: to further develop their Vietnamese language skills, to enhance their background knowledge of the target culture, and also to promote their independent learning. Therefore, a blogging project can help the students achieve these learning goals.

### **4 The project background**

Four groups of twenty two students participated in this project. Most of the students majored in Arts or Science in their second or third year (from 19 years old to 23 years old). Before this project, they had had 120 hours of formal instruction in Vietnamese as an elective module.

This blogging project was a supplementary classroom activity, as a part of the module's continuous assessment which includes class participation, homework, tests, oral presentation and vocabulary quizzes. The whole course was structured around a textbook which has been written for pre-intermediate level students.

This blogging project was set up with two main purposes: to create a platform for the students to communicate in Vietnamese: i.e. to help them practice their reading and writing skills; and to create opportunities for the students to learn more about Vietnam: i.e. to help them improve their background knowledge of Vietnam. In other words, this project was designed in a way to help students meet their learning goals: develop reading and writing fluency as well as improve their background knowledge of the target culture.

The students were required to create an account and blog on a popular Vietnamese blogging site [www.cyworld.vn](http://www.cyworld.vn). Although there are a number of different blog hosting services available to the users in English ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com), [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com), <http://wordpress.org>, <http://my.opera.com>, [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) and Vietnamese (<http://blogtiengviet.net>, <http://vn.360plus.yahoo.com/>), to name just a few, Cyworld was chosen for its unique features. First of all, Cyworld is both global and local. Globally speaking, Cyworld is available in the United States, Taiwan, China, Korea, and Japan in their respective native languages. Locally speaking, Cyworld Vietnam only has Vietnamese language, which is truly an authentic environment for the students to practice their Vietnamese. The site has embedded software to enable users to type Vietnamese diacritics. The site also has various interactive functions such as blog, video, picture, shop, chat room, forum, celebrities' blogs, etc. Furthermore, it is highly customizable (i.e. privacy setting, minime (avatar), miniroom, minihome, etc.) The setting can be changed to public, private or friends only. Users can change their avatar as well as decorate their miniroom and minihome to best reflect their cyber identities.

For this project, the students' tasks were: first of all, sign up for a free account and learn to type in Vietnamese. After that, they also need to shop on Cyworld (for free) to decorate their minihome with furniture and music theme. A number of blog entries (both textbook-related and free choice) were posted by the students over a period of ten weeks. Besides posting entries, the students were requested to give comments on their classmates' blogs.

At the beginning of the semester, questionnaires were administered to the students to learn about their perception of blogging, and to collect their ideas about the topics to be included as well as the number of entries to be posted. At the end of the semester, questionnaires were administered to get their feedback on the effectiveness of the project in developing their Vietnamese language skills, the difficulties they might have faced when doing the project, as well as their suggestions to improve the project. With their consent, a random number of students were invited to take part in one-on-one interviews so that the teacher could get more in-depth information on their use of blogs.

In order to meet the students' needs and to improve the project in a way that can best meet their learning goals, constant communication was maintained between the teacher and the students throughout the project. At the beginning of the project, the teacher showed the student the functionality of Cyworld and provided the students with a glossary of commonly-used words in this blog site. The teacher also assisted the students in their signing up for an account if they needed any assistance. Throughout the semester, the students had the options of either posting an entry online immediately or sending their first draft to their teacher for commenting before posting. The teacher also visited the students' blog sites regularly to give comments and responded to their comments, while constantly updating her own blog site.

## **5 Findings and suggestions**

Since this is an on-going action research study, the data were collected from a variety of sources. First of all, let's look at the students' feedback on this project.

### **5.1 Students' feedback**

Generally speaking, the students liked the project. Overall, there was positive response among the students about it. Most of them used words such as "fun", "interesting", "enjoyable" to describe this experience. For example, one student wrote:

This is a new experience for me as I have a Vietnamese blog! Even some of my Vietnamese friends have yet opened an account. Interesting and fun.

Another student also explained why she thought the project was fun:

Interesting. It was fun because it was on a platform different from usual projects. Shopping on Cyworld was fun too.

However, there were also complaints that the project was "stressful" or "difficult". Most students found blogging on Cyworld very challenging at the beginning because of reasons such as technical problems or writing topics (see below).

#### **5.1.1 Learner-perceived benefits**

From the students' feedbacks given in the questionnaires as well as in some of the interviews, it was clear that the blogging project did help them improve their reading skills, writing skills, vocabulary base, and background information on Vietnam. In addition, their typing skills were also improved thanks to this project. A number of the students elaborated how blogging on Cyworld was beneficial to their writing skills:

I had a lot of practice writing the essay and the translations. It was the best writing practice I had, because it was completely not guided.

Blogging has enabled me to expand my vocabulary and enhanced my writing skills (e.g. writing style, etc.).

To be able to express myself better in not just Vietnamese but colloquial Vietnamese as well.

How to write essays in Vietnamese fluently, esp. with regards to choice of words and grammar structure.

This project gives me the opportunity to write more frequently in Vietnamese which has certainly helped in boosting my writing skills. We are also given the chance to comment on our friends' blog post. This will improve our reading skills as well.

The students also shared the reasons why they thought this blogging project enhanced their understanding of Vietnamese culture and way of life:

I read a lot of articles in Vietnamese and English, and I learnt a lot about Vietnam. I particularly liked this because not being a SE (i.e. South East Asian studies) -major, I was familiar with very little about Vietnam.

I have a better understanding of Vietnam's social and cultural way of life now.

Lots of updated news, not found in textbook.

I have learnt more Vietnamese terms and was being exposed to many other aspects of Vietnamese which I wasn't exposed to previously, for example, Vietnamese songs, videos and motivational prose.

It is apparent from the student feedback that this project was useful in helping the students improve their reading and writing skills, and at the same time, provided them with opportunities to learn about Vietnamese culture.

### **5.1.2 *Learner-perceived difficulties***

Although the students found the project interesting and beneficial, they faced a number of difficulties when doing so. First of all, regarding technical problems, the students found it difficult to learn to use Cyworld because there were too many new words, and they did not know what to do when some icons popped up. In addition, the web page loaded very slowly and it took quite a long time to upload. The students found it very frustrating, especially when they had to redo a task several times because of the webpage. Second of all, for those students who were not used to typing in Vietnamese, learning to type was hard initially. Last, but not least, they found that some essay topics from the textbook were difficult and not interesting enough.

## **5.2 *Teacher's reflection***

### **5.2.1 *Teacher-perceived benefits***

When choosing any CALL application, a language educator should bear in mind any pedagogical aspects of that tool as well as the learning outcomes that they hope this tool can bring about. In my capacity as a teacher, I always gather information to reflect on a teaching tool that I use for both teaching and assessment purposes. Upon reflection, I have found that this project was beneficial to the students in several ways that are concurrent with the literature.

#### **5.2.1.1 *Blogging to improve reading and writing skills***

Similar to Fellner & Apple (2006) and Pinkman (2005), I found that blogging helped the students improve their reading and writing skills. Since this blogging project was carried out for a

period of one semester, it was easy for me to keep track of the students' performance during this period of time. Although there was no quantitative evidence, anecdotally, I found some improvement in word count and quality of the students' blog entries from the beginning to the end of the project. Their first entries were usually shorter and simpler than their last entries. One of the factors was that the students received comments from their teacher and classmates. They could also pick up words and expressions from their classmates' blogs through their teacher's corrective feedback to improve their writing. Other improvements could also be seen in their test performances, such as guessing the word meaning in context, and reading for main ideas.

### ***5.2.1.2 Increased motivation and sense of achievement***

This blogging project helped increase the students' motivation. This finding is supported by Blackstone et al. (2007), Fellner & Apple (2006) and Pinkman (2005). One student shared that:

It's more motivating to post an entry on the blog than to submit an essay on paper like we did last semester.

Another student wrote:

It's also very fun, which makes learning more enjoyable.

This provides further support to Fellner & Apple's (2006) view that blog can be more motivating because a familiar task becomes fresh in the new medium of the Internet.

It goes without saying that motivation plays an important role in second language acquisition. Therefore, it is encouraging to know that this project did motivate the students in their Vietnamese language learning.

Furthermore, some students found that this blogging project gave them a sense of achievement. One student wrote:

I am very proud to have a Vietnamese blog when many of my Vietnamese friends do not have one yet. My friends are surprised when seeing my Cyworld blog.

Three students added a link to their Cyworld blogs on their Facebook and NUS student profile.

### ***5.2.1.3 Blogging to learn more about the target culture***

It was found that the students could improve their background knowledge of Vietnamese culture through this project. Since Cyworld makes blogs written by the Vietnamese available to the students, and the students were required to read and share articles about Vietnam, this result was predictable. As there is an interrelationship between language and culture, I believe that the students' increased understanding of Vietnam, to a certain extent, facilitates their Vietnamese language acquisition.

### ***5.2.1.4 Promoting learner autonomy***

Another benefit of this project was to promote student autonomous learning. More than one third of the students posted more on their blogs than requested, for example, posting links to articles about Vietnam, or posting images and videos related to the Vietnamese culture. About one third of the students mentioned that they would probably continue to blog after the project finished. These findings lend support to Blackstone et al. (2007) who claim that "regular blogging encourages autonomous learning." (p. 1)

In addition, this blogging project was helpful in connecting the students with others outside the classroom, and thus expanded their learning platform (Richardson, 2006). One student commented that:

Through Cyworld I met some ‘authentic’ Vietnamese. It was very fun talking to them and trying to figure out what they were saying

Some students made new friends online and received “Happy Birthday” wishes from their Cyworld friends. In addition, some students visited some Vietnamese students’ and Vietnamese pop stars’ blogs and commented that Vietnamese youngsters like Korean music.

### 5.2.1.5 *Community of learners*

Another benefit of this blog project was that it helped create stronger bonds among the students, which gives support to Seitzinger (2006) who notes that “a blog and its comments, or a group of blogs, can evolve into a community of learners” (p. 6). This project really helped the students to interact and learn from each other, not only in terms of language skills but also in social skills. One student wrote:

I find this project very meaningful because it allows me to better understand my friends in terms of character and personality. It allows to the students to interact with each other which helps to strengthen our friendship.

In fact, the blog could be seen as a common diary in which students wrote about the highlighted events that they shared together in one semester. Many of the comments from blog posts have really turned into a ‘conversation’ in which one student commented, another responded to comments, then initiated new ideas, then another student responded, etc. Some of the language references used in this type of ‘conversation’ can only be clearly understood by this community of learners themselves. When asked whether she would continue to use Cyworld in the future, one student responded:

Perhaps. Because only through Cyworld I can use Vietnamese language. If I use Vietnamese language in Facebook very few can understand.

### 5.2.1.6 *Comments as powerful feedback tools*

The comment function of the blog site enables teachers to give timely responses to a student’s blog post. Unlike the usual homework submission, in which a teacher’s corrective feedback can only be seen by one student, a comment on a blog post can be seen by different students. In my experience, when there was any inappropriate use of language in a student’s writing, I provided a recast by providing a better choice of expression in the form of a question. For example, in one blog entry, student A (a male student) wrote about his dream house. Following are the comments posted on this post:

Student B: *Nhà bạn đẹp lắm. Bố mẹ bạn hạnh phúc và may mắn quá vì có con gái tốt như bạn. Bạn phải làm chăm chỉ để thực hiện mơ của bạn.* (Your house is very beautiful. Your parents are so happy and lucky to have a good daughter like you. You have to work hard to realize your dream)

Teacher: *Cô cũng nghĩ bố mẹ A rất hạnh phúc và may mắn khi có con trai ngoan như A. Chúc em sớm đạt được ước mơ.* (I also think A’s parents are very happy and lucky to have a good son like A. I wish you would be able to make your dream come true soon.)

Teacher: *Sao em lại muốn sống ở Bukit Timah? Còn East Coast thì sao? Em không thích biển à?* (Why do you want to live in Bukit Timah? How about East Coast? Don’t you like the seaside?)

Student A: *Cám ơn cô, em muốn sống ở Bukit Timah vì có nhiều người giàu và em rất thích nhà ở Bukit Timah. Nhà ở đó đẹp hơn nhà ở East Coast. Em thích biển nhưng em scared of tsunami.* (Thank you teacher, I want to live in Bukit Timah because there are many rich people there and I like houses in Bukit Timah a lot. Houses there are more beautiful than those in East Coast. I like the seaside but I am scared of tsunami)

Teacher: *Em sợ tsunami à? Nhưng Singapo rất nhỏ, nếu có tsunami thì ở Bukit Timah cũng không an toàn :( Cô cũng thấy nhà ở đó rất đẹp.* (Are you scared of tsunami? But Singapore is very small, if there was tsunami then even Bukit Timah would not be safe either. I also think houses there are very beautiful.)

Student C: *Em đồng ý với cô Lê: Bukit Timah cũng không an toàn. Có lẽ bạn nên sống ở núi ở Việt Nam!* (I agree with Ms. Le: Bukit Timah is also not safe. Perhaps you should live in the mountain in Vietnam!)

Student A: *Em sợ tsunami nhất.* (I am most scared of tsunami.)

Student D: *Tại sao bạn rất sợ tsunami? Bạn có trải qua trước đây không?* (Why are you very scared of tsunami? Have you experienced it before?)

It is clear from the above comments that initially student A did not know the Vietnamese equivalent word of “to be scared of,” so he used the English phrase to respond to the teacher’s question. When the teacher scaffolded and gave the Vietnamese word “sợ” then not only student A could pick up the word, but student D could also use the word in her question. This shows that blogs can be a very useful platform for scaffolding which enhances the students’ learning.

In her analysis of the power of comments, Seitzinger (2006) concludes: “It is impossible to be a passive learner when reading comments on your own posts and responding in comments to other’s blog posts. It forces learners to engage higher cognitive skills.” (p. 8) Analysis of my students’ blog posts and comments indeed lends further support to this claim.

To sum up, the benefits of this project can be seen not only in developing the students’ reading and writing skills, increasing their motivation, improving their background knowledge, helping them learn autonomously, building a community of learners, but also providing powerful feedback tools.

### 5.2.2 *Teacher-perceived difficulties*

There were a number of difficulties facing the students when doing this project. It was apparent that there was one problem with the website speed. However, since we have to rely on an external website for our project, we have no choice but to hope that the website will be upgraded in the near future. Another problem was that there was an overload of new words which could cause discouragement to the students. As the whole web page is in Vietnamese, with a great number of technical terms, the students sometimes found themselves clueless. If they are too overwhelmed in a new language environment, they may feel more hesitant to explore the site any further. In addition, another factor was that some students may receive unwanted comments from other web users. Actually, we can change the privacy setting to private, but since we want to create an open space for the students to interact with Vietnamese people in Vietnam, this problem seems unavoidable. Fortunately, up till now, no negative comments were sent to the students. Lastly, lack of continuous and spontaneous communication is another shortcoming of a blog project. Unlike face to face communication, blogging is quite limited in terms of facilitating students in their speaking and listening skills. There is always a gap between the time when a comment is posted and the time another response is given.

### 5.2.3 *Suggestions*

Overall, the project was a great success, from both teaching and learning perspectives. In order to make the project more effective and beneficial for the students, I would like to give some



suggestions. Firstly, detailed instructions on how to write a good post should be given to the students. This can help improve the quality of postings. In addition, to encourage students to give comments, we should make commenting an assessment criterion. We should give students instructions on how to give comments and respond to comments. To make sure that students can learn from each other, we should use the ‘blogging buddy’ method (Blackstone et al., 2007) and peer review to improve quality of postings. We should also show the students how to choose relevant privacy setting to prevent unwanted comments. Since research has found that “communicative writing would encourage students to write more expressively” (Fellner & Apple, 2006, p. 23), the topics covered in a blogging project should be both textbook-related and free choice. Lastly, as blog can be used as a tool for language and cultural exchange and collaboration (Carney), consideration should be made of whether to set up a joint-project with a class of university students in Vietnam so that the students from both universities can benefit from their language and cultural learning.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have summarised features of blogs and its popularity as discussed in the literature. I have also pointed out the increasing interest in using blogs in language classes. A description of my blogging project was also provided with an analysis of benefits and difficulties as seen from both student and teacher perspectives. Due to time and space constraints, various aspects of blogging and language teaching were not addressed. Therefore, further research could be done to find out how to make the best use of blogs as a teaching and learning tool and also an assessment tool. To ascertain the effectiveness of blogging on language proficiency further longitudinal study would be desirable.

In conclusion, from the results of this action research study, it has been shown that blogging can be a useful constructivist learning tool to supplement classroom teaching practice. If well-integrated with face-to-face teaching, blogs can give students a very useful platform to practice their target language skills, improve knowledge of the target culture, and develop learner autonomy.

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