

Edublogs in foreign language teaching: integrating language and culture

Los edublogs en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras: integrando lengua y cultura

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ABSTRACT

Edublogs have traditionally been overlooked by scholars as they were not considered to be worthy of academic attention. Nevertheless, the pedagogic paradigm that now pervades has triggered a keen interest in the Web 2.0 and its resources. Students and teachers alike are facing great exposure to blogs, which have been conveniently transposed to the classrooms in all disciplines at all levels of education. Hereafter we will explore the use of edublogs for foreign language learning defending the stance that culture is a chief element that should not be taught separately from the target language that defines it. The target language should mediate learning, blurring all cleavage that may exist between culture and language. Edublogs –whether teacher blogs, student blogs or class blogs– stand as the perfect scenario for collaborative building of knowledge, where language is perfectly integrated in its culture. In this article we suggest the term: ‘CILTES’ Culture-Integrated Language Teaching in Edublog Scenarios as the key for effective language learning. The following research presents a new categorization of edublogs for language learning purposes enabling a closer look at the student-teacher tandem in relation to higher or lower presence of culture in blogs.

Keywords: edublog; language teaching; cultural awareness; CILTES (Culture-Integrated Language Teaching in Edublog Scenarios); flipped classroom; e-resources.

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RESUMEN

Los edublogs no han gozado tradicionalmente de gran atención por parte de los estudiosos al considerarse que carecían de peso académico. Pero el paradigma educativo imperante ha despertado un gran interés por la Web 2.0 y sus recursos. Estudiantes y profesores por igual se enfrentan a una gran exposición a los blogs, que han sido llevados a las aulas de todas las disciplinas en todos los niveles educativos. En este artículo, exploraremos el uso de edublogs para el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras defendiendo la cultura como elemento central que no debe ser enseñada por separado del idioma que la define. La lengua meta debe mediar el aprendizaje haciendo desaparecer la división entre lengua y cultura. Los blogs de educación (blogs de estudiantes, de clase y el blog del tutor) son el escenario perfecto para la construcción colaborativa de conocimientos donde el lenguaje está perfectamente integrado en su cultura. Sugerimos el término: 'CIELCE' (Cultura Integrada en la Enseñanza de Lenguas en Contextos de Edublogs). En este análisis presentamos una nueva categorización de los edublogs destinados al aprendizaje de lenguas propiciando una mirada más cercana al tándem estudiante-profesor en relación con el nivel de presencia cultural en los blogs.

Palabras clave: edublog; enseñanza de idiomas; lengua extranjera; sensibilización cultural; CIELCE (Cultura Integrada en la Enseñanza de Lenguas en Contextos de Edublogs); aula invertida; recursos en línea.

1. Introduction: Point of departure and evolution of edublogs

Weblogs are multimedia online sites whose growing interactive potential is transforming them into powerful communication devices, since their original use as online personal diaries. The term was coined in 1997 by John Barger and it later changed to ‘blog’ (in 1999) thanks to Peter Merholz by deriving it from the sentence ‘we blog’ from his blog Peterme.com. These sites enjoyed increasing popularity with the turn of the millennium attracting users worldwide and eventually allowing for bi-directional communication with their authors. The characteristics of blogs multiplied as the reading public gained relevance in the blogs they followed resulting in multiple-author spaces. The evolution towards the Web 2.0 allowed users to actively engage in online material creation, modification and expansion (Mestre 2005), functions formerly reserved to the blog curator.

FL (foreign language) educators soon realized the immense potential that the new online resources added to the learning environments and set out to integrate the affordances of such spread and useful resources in their education practice (see Godwin-Jones, 2003, 2005; Sundqvist and Sylvén, 2016 and more recently Damascelli, 2017). The edublog was then born as the combination of ‘education’ and ‘blog’ and foreign language teaching (FLT) found its way in the implementation of these e-sites rapidly. The reasons behind this laid primarily in the easiness to get in touch with people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thus involving in communication (e.g., L1 speakers of any language and learners of that language in a different part of the world). However, edublogs underwent a period of initial sidelining within the blogosphere. Hence, we can trace back the presence of the first call for the Edublog Awards contest in 2004 in response to the lack of representation of edublogs in previous blog contests as noted by Torres (2006).

A number of international telecollaboration programs and projects emerged aiming to investigate the impact on the target culture knowledge and linguistic skills mediated by computers. Such is the case of the TILA program: Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition. The emphasis was directed to the new technologies shifting the focus of attention from the content taught to the resources applied for FLT. Research demonstrates that edublogging in the FL class raises students’ cultural awareness and competence (Elola and Oskoz, 2008; Borau, Ullrich, Feng and Shen, 2009) alongside their reflective learning and autonomy (Pinkman, 2005; Ducate and Lomicka, 2005; Yang, 2009; Lee, 2010, 2011; Hourigan and Murray, 2010) and their linguistic competence (Carney, 2009;

Sun and Chang, 2012). Among the linguistic competences, it is worth stressing the crucial role of edublogs as pivotal aspects for the comprehensive development of young learners mainly.²

Reflective learning promotes meta-cognitive knowledge about the processes involved in FL learning leading to more efficient language acquisition. Blogs admittedly provide an attractive scenario for students to take part in the processes of 'thinking-writing' and 'presentation writing' (Dysthe et. al.: 45, qtd. in Walker Rettberg: n/p). Reflective learning does not only occur when students write a blog entry; readers are also compelled to interact by means of interpreting and analyzing what they are reading. This is especially visible when the topic in question can be easily shifted to daily life situations as it happens with culture-related subjects. In spite of the undeniable relevance of the duality language-culture, the cultural load in many FL edublogs is somehow light. Reflective learning merges critical thinking facilitating target language learning as well as the student's L1 by paying attention to the mental processes activated.

At the present time, edublogs enjoy great regard not only from the pedagogical angle but also from the side of scholars. The Spanish Premio Espiral Edublogs grants its awards for the best edublogs in different categories (from 'Learning Communities' to 'Reflections about the teaching practice' among many others). There is an extensive variety of edublogs depending on their topic, their author(s), the different contexts where they are created and addressed, etc. Hereafter we present a brief chronology of the classifications of edublogs provided throughout history in order to set the ground for our own edublogs classification presented later on. In 2003, Aaron P. Campbell suggested a threefold classification of language teaching blogs: the tutor blog, learner blog and class blog depending on who creates them (Campbell, 2003). However, we know of many edublogs which are not necessarily designed within the class syllabus that are devoted to sharing and discussing teaching methodologies and practices standing as valuable arenas for educators worldwide. This is the case of the SFL (Spanish as a Foreign Language) edublog *Aprende español callejeando por Madrid* (<https://palabraspormadrid.blogspot.com.es/>) which stands as a useful e-resource for flipped learning of the Spanish language by means of its culture which this study analyzes in the following section. Thus, we need thus a more accurate classification of edublogs that successfully meets the new trends

² See Richardson's "Connective reading and connective writing" as explained in his blog Weblogg-ed (<http://weblogg-ed.com/>) for a deeper understanding of the meta-cognitive effects underlying online writing for educational purposes.

and demands. Three years after this classification Richardson (20-25) put forth a new categorization of edublogs. He rated them as follows: class portals, online filing cabinet, e-portfolio, collaborative space, knowledge management and articulation and school web site. In 2007, Mario Tomé presented these five types of edublogs: blogs as educational websites, audioblogs and vlogs (blogs with video clips), teacher's blog, student's blog and the class blog (Tomé, 2007; quoted in Martínez García 127-128). All these classifications of edublogs follow different criteria resulting in more overreaching e-spaces as educators and bloggers responded to new educational scenarios and methods.

A major study in the field of edublogs and culture-embedded language learning was the one conducted in 2009 by Lina Lee in collaboration with the University of Granada (Spain) involving a group of 16 undergraduate American students learning Spanish who enhanced their autonomous learning skills by engaging in intercultural linguistic exchanges through blogs. Their constructivist (see Siemens, 2005, 2006) task-based and computer-assisted methodology was rapidly followed by other programs in different languages across the globe such as Portuguese (Melo-Pfeifer, 2015) or French (López Santiago, 2016) paying attention to a greater or lesser extent to the cultural competence. The target language becomes now another system of thought that the learner must conquer and make his or her own via an array of strategies and resources. Barriers should fall in favor of organic, fluid languages without allowing ourselves to disregard the factual variety of culture settings in which each language evolves. The following section will account for the need to consider the FL culture together with the language to attain real comprehensive human development.

2. Culture in class, culture outside: Why is c-blended teaching necessary?

It has not been until recently that the language's culture studied at class gained weight in the education curricula as an added, cross-cultural competence worldwide. Cultural awareness appeared as the self's realization of his or her own culture introducing the notion of trans-cultural awareness. This concept aims to transcend inter-cultural ideas implying that "our own cultural awareness is shaped by the interaction with other cultures, that it reaches a level beyond its original setup" (Wortham 1). This involves higher meta-cognitive, linguistic and cultural levels in learners, and therefore, higher read-

iness to interact with and delve into other cultures. In other words, culture-blended (c-blended) teaching is disclosed as a *sine qua non* requirement for effective language learning.

Didactics has stood as an ally for language teaching in the context surrounding the target language in culture-blended (c-blended) language classrooms. The language started to be considered as the visible side of a bigger frame called culture. But despite the current ubiquity of the FL culture in education curricula, some critics have argued against a joint teaching of the FL and its context. Such is the case of the renowned Indian linguist Kachru who elaborated on English as a second and foreign language and believed in the need to teach the culture separate from the language (26). At Kachru's time scholars found in English the latest *lingua franca* thus giving rise to a number of concerns about its possible evolution and adaptations in the hands of an increasing number of second and foreign language speakers and, therefore, cultural scenarios. Other critics put the accent on the difference between learning a FL and learning its culture by supporting the thesis that culture should be studied as a separate skill aligning with teaching *how* rather than *what*:

You can learn a lot of cultural features but it doesn't teach you sensitivity and awareness or even how to behave in certain situations. What the fifth language skill teaches you is the mindset and techniques to adapt your use of English to learn about, understand and appreciate the values, ways of doing things and unique qualities of other cultures. It involves understanding how to use language to accept difference, to be flexible and tolerant of ways of doing things which might be different to yours. It is an attitudinal change that is expressed through the use of language (Tomalin: n/p).

However, the vast majority of the existing curricula do include the cultural competence within the FL class syllabus in a metacultural didactic framework. That is, students learn the target language while using it to discuss about its cultural aspects (for a study of the types of culture, see Tomalin: n/p). Wikis and blogs are two notable e-resources employed for this aim together with other multimedia material such as written and video chats (Elola and Oskoz, 2010; Thomé-Williams, 2016). They allow students to get in touch with their FL homologues abroad (in telecollaboration and immersion programs) or with their L1 peers, to access online unabridged material in the target language and specially to share their class work (class blog) and keep in touch with other education agents, namely their FL teacher and school (teacher/tutor blog and school web site).

We should not forget that language cannot be separated from its culture as culture shapes the language of its users interrelatedly. However, there is an ongoing debate as whether meaningful communication can occur outside a given context (i.e., culture) or if it must always be integrated in its culture. For Cummins (1984, 1994) language is a dual intersystem operating as a semiotic system in itself and as part of the context that contains it. Nonetheless, if we take language as a part of an education curriculum, we will see an international movement towards interdisciplinary cross-cultural curricula, where subjects will have their own curricula interwoven with other subjects. That is the scenario in which the Web 2.0 e-tools will function in a more integral what so that language can no longer be 'decontextualised' as the scholars above argued.

2.1. CILTES: Culture-Integrated Language Teaching in Edublog Scenarios

Holistic curricula must necessarily embrace the notion of contextualized language (culture-integrated language) to better interweave the target language and its culture.³ Some scholars have examined the interdependence between the foreign language's epistemic relations and the learner's social relations. We owe this exploration to Maton (2014), who formulated his famous Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) setting out to provide a paradigm to measure two factors taking place at any level of education processes. Maton established two axes: epistemic relations (vertical axis) and social relations (horizontal) resulting in four quadrants: knowledge code (upper left), elite code (upper right), knower code (bottom right) and relativist code (bottom left). This system has been extensively adapted to different education cases and pedagogy needs.

Hereunder we suggest a Venn diagram of four sets, namely: FL linguistic content (the foreign language *per se*) and the FL culture as the vertical-axis, and the two agents involved in the teaching-learning process (teacher's blog and learner's blog) as the horizontal-axis. The following chart considers the resulting interrelations performed by these four elements:

³ Similar studies have been developed aiming to integrate the target language and the content in other areas of the curriculum under the research of the CLIL methodology although it did not focus on the cultural aspect of the language under study but rather it sought to extend this language (English) as the vehicle to teach the different subjects at school or high school.

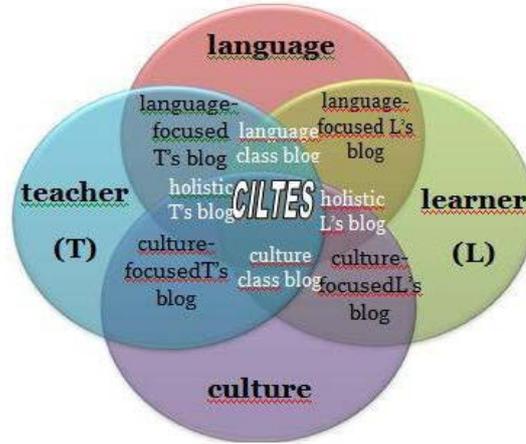


Figure 1. Diagram of the culture-language interrelations in teacher's and learner's blogs in FL teaching.

We are going to start by analyzing the four groups in the first category with some examples of edublogs aimed at language learning at all levels of education. Language-focused teacher's blogs are normally used by educators to reflect on the languages they teach allowing for scattered references to the FL culture. What makes them special as language-learning teacher edublogs is the fact that they present aspects of the target language in a metalinguistic manner. An instance of this group is *El blog de don Abel* (<http://blogdedonabel.blogspot.com.es/>) created to teach Spanish as a second or foreign language. In this blog, the author presents the Spanish language relating it to some culture-based details of Spain and Spanish-speaking L1 countries. It is worth mentioning here that although there are foreign language-based teacher edublogs, it is advisable to interweave some culture references with the language, that is, to teach it in context. Another type of teacher blog is the one where teachers share their anecdotes and opinions about language teaching, offering material and resources to other educators creating a collaborative community. This is the case of a number of edublogs, such as *Insuf-fle* (<http://insuf-fle.hautetfort.com/>), a blog designed by the French teacher and scholar Jean-Michel Ducrot where its author posts entries with e-resources and links to webs he finds useful for his lessons.

In culture-focused teacher's blogs educators provide a good basis to enhance language learning by favoring the cultural dimension. This type of edublogs normally requires a more advanced level of the target language as students are expected to enlarge their L2 culture knowledge. The case of *Passion pour la culture Française* (<http://pasionporlaculturafrancesa.blogspot.com.es/>) makes a tour around

some of the main cultural celebrations in France such as typical French patisserie for Christmas or tongue twisters through links to videos and to other webpages. France's long-standing intercultural heritage has been wisely taken to their curricula by educators and educational institutions aiming to integrate foreign students more effectively as well as to celebrate and promote their culture overseas. The new e-tools have brought a great advance in this sense for educators with the rise of blogs like *Le blog de French teacher* (<http://www.culturefle.net/>) by Vanessa-George Barraud. In this site we may find references to songs, politics and historical figures relevant from the French History, among others. Its posts also indicate the level of language of each entry according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), which facilitates browsing for the entries that meet our level of French.

Students can also create their own blogs. In fact, many blogs managed by students share more features with personal diaries than with educational sites. Culture-focused learner blogs normally serve as meeting points to share their views and ideas about trips abroad and tips for newcomers to their countries. *Around the World* (<https://blogs.cornell.edu/sushmitha/>) and *Jenn across the pond* (<http://jennacrossthepond.weebly.com/blog>) are two examples of student blogs created after their authors left their home countries (India and the USA, respectively) to head for new destinations for a limited duration or an undefined time period. There are also broader platforms (not learner blogs as such but collections of posts from students) aimed at gathering students who are willing to share their travelling adventures with other tourists e.g., *College Tourist* (<http://www.thecollegetourist.com/>).

Students tend to leave aside the target language alone in the absence of a teacher. This is what some student edublogs show when it comes to foreign language linguistic aspects. It seems reasonable if we consider that the educators' role is that of facilitators, monitoring students and providing the resources and material required for effective language learning. Therefore, we will encounter instances of student's blogging –either as blog managers, with comments or by posting their own works on the blog– when we introduce the class blog.

In a class blog, the teacher and the students engage in “collaborative discussion [...] [and students benefit from] a greater sense of freedom and involvement than with the tutor blog [and better-guided tasks than with the learner blog]” (Campbell: n/p). Collaborative

learning stands as a desirable scenario for peer learning by fostering students' awareness-raising and autonomy (Khabiri and Lavasani, 2012; Okada, Connolly and Scott, 2012). In a language class blog, the teacher's aim is to present the FL as neatly as possible. This category relies heavily on multimedia and flash content as blogs seek to appeal learners by focusing on the FL. *Nausica* (<https://nausicanausica.blogspot.com.es/>) is a blog designed by a Spanish teacher of Classical Languages. It contains flash-supported posts with some of Aesop's fables adapted in Greek for the students as well as university-entrance examination samples of the subject. Culture class blogs unite the students and the teacher for a shared interest in culture. There are not many class blogs solely devoted to the target culture as language is always the vehicle for learning. Most blogs that fall into this category are supported by virtual collaborative e-platforms, being Moodle the most extended in flipped classroom environments (Antón Remírez, 2017).

Holistic teacher blogs emphasize an intertwined study of both the FL culture and language with little participation from the side of learners.⁴In holistic teacher blogs learning is no longer divided into cultural competences and linguistic skills as both sides operate in a reciprocal relationship where culture speaks of the language and the language manifests itself in the very culture. *Aprende español callejeando por Madrid* (<https://palabraspormadrid.blogspot.com.es/>) illustrates this category. A blog that was awarded the first prize at the *Concurso de Blogs para la Promoción del Español y la Cultura en Español* in 2013 (*Blog Contest for the Promotion of Spanish and the Spanish Culture*; an initiative of the Cervantes Institute in collaboration with Google) and appeared among the Top 25 Language Learning Blogs in 2016. On this blog, Marisa Coronado (a Spanish-Foreign Language teacher) uses the streets, shops, monuments, graffiti and everything she encounters in the cityscape of Madrid. The blog also shows a page where educators can find resources to implement in their classes.

The author of this blog takes photographs of sayings and common Spanish informal-register expressions displayed on signs, billboards or banners that relate to some aspect of the target language. Then, she provides a thorough explanation about the etymology and the use of that word or expression. Some posts are: "Soy la pera",

⁴ For an analysis of the type of information teachers present in their blogs, see Hou, Chang and Sung's study "What kinds of knowledge do teachers share on blogs? A quantitative content analysis of teachers' knowledge sharing on blogs" (2010).

“Haberlas hay las” and “Es mi sino”. Humor plays a central role in this blog as the proverbs studied provide a ludic basis for the study of a given linguistic trait. Humor has been reported to account for successful outcome at language teaching courses as Serradilla Castaño (2000) and Del Campo Martínez (1999) argue, to cite but a couple of instances. Moreover, the use of this authentic material makes the teaching all the more productive, bridging the gap between the language studied and the one spoken in the real world at the same time that it increases the student’s feeling of belonging to the foreign culture. At this stage, it becomes more complex to determine if you are learning about the language or about aspects of the target culture, which is precisely what education should head for.

Finally, at the core of the diagram we can find what we have called ‘CILTES: Culture-Integrated Language Teaching in Edublog Scenarios’. CILTES aims to provide an integral insight into the blogs where educators and learners engage in foreign language and culture learning. Language is still used as the vehicle to tackle cultural issues. Mme Henderson curates the blog *Les Chevaliers du Château des Champions* (http://mmehenderson.mmehenderson.com/my_weblog/). It combines the teacher’s suggestions for her students with some links to the learners’ blogs on the right sidebar posted under the label ‘Madame’s Student Blogs’. Henderson’s blog includes the teacher’s and the students’ contributions (blogs and projects) to the French culture as they build on the foreign language side by side. Hence, we can easily relate the input students receive in the form of multimedia resources to the students’ output in their learners’ blogs and class projects.

3. Conclusion: Bridging linguistic and cultural gaps in blog-mediated learning

This article has already presented evidence to defend the stance that languages cannot be understood or studied in no-man’s land, removed from the context that pervades all aspects of its linguistic-cultural nature. On the contrary, not only should language teachers exploit and benefit from the affordances of edublogs but teachers of all disciplines should integrate it into their syllabi. Edublogs are praised for their capacity to shorten the distance between teachers and students, teacher and other teachers and students and other students everywhere. But the next step is already taking place in societies and it consists on bridging the gap between a language and its speakers, its folklore, its proverbs; in sum, the culture that makes it meaningful in the broadest sense. This integration of the language

and culture of FLs finds its reflection in the edublogosphere, with an increasing number of language-related blogs and students taking more active roles in these new learning collaborative processes.

This paper has argued in favor of teacher-student collaboration and student-student cooperative learning mediated by edublogs, but it is worth highlighting the relevance of the educator in this process. The instances of blogs cited above on which teachers function as facilitators in class blogs exemplify clearly the role of teachers in the latest education paradigm. There is still a long way to go in the implementation of Web 2.0 tools in the classroom. And although the body of research is not too developed this is a path that teachers will walk alongside their students working hand in hand to create knowledge and share it with the world.

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