STUDENTS' ATTITUDE, COMPETENCE AND MOTIVATION IN THE USE OF THE TRAVEL BLOG FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM

ACTITUD, COMPETENCIA Y MOTIVACIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIANTES EN EL USO DE LOS BLOGS DE VIAJES PARA LA CLASE DE ILE

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the attitude of Spanish Secondary Education students as regards their competence in the use of the Internet in general and of (travel) blogs in particular. Issues such as students' motivation to learn an L2 or students' media literacy will also be discussed to frame the focus of the study. The sample of respondents includes learners enrolled in the first two years of Compulsory Secondary Education (*ESO*), and in the last stage of Secondary Education (*Bachillerato*). A questionnaire was accordingly administered to them to consider the appropriateness of, and to later decide the approach of, the teaching of English through the travel blog in the EFL classroom. Overall, results indicate that learners' digital competence and generic awareness should be further developed towards a more functional and responsible use. Even so, learners positively view blogs as a valid resource that may help them improve in certain language skills and areas. and that may boost their motivation.

Key words: travel blogs, digital competence, Secondary Education, EFL classroom

Resumen

Este artículo explora la actitud de alumnos españoles de Educación Secundaria en relación a su competencia en el uso de Internet en general y de los blogs (de viajes) en particular. El foco de este estudio gira en torno a la motivación para aprender una segunda lengua y la alfabetización digital de los estudiantes. La muestra de encuestados incluye alumnos de los dos primeros cursos de la ESO y de la etapa de Bachillerato. Así pues, se les repartió un cuestionario para considerar si era apropiado enseñar inglés mediante blogs de viajes en la clase de ILF y decidir con qué enfoque hacerlo. En conjunto, los resultados indican que los estudiantes deben seguir desarrollando su competencia digital y conciencia de género de cara a un uso más funcional y responsable. Aun así, consideran los blogs como un recurso positivo para mejorar en ciertas destrezas y áreas del lenguaje, y que puede aumentar su motivación

Palabras clave: blog de viajes, competencia digital, Educación Secundaria, clase de ILE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the current Spanish Secondary Education legal provisions, as well as in the textbooks and materials employed to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL), not many digital genres are included, apart from the informal e-mail. Although mention is made to the need to develop students' digital key competence, no sufficient, specific methodological guidelines are provided on how to do this. This could indicate that not enough emphasis is being given at secondary schools to our students' day-to-day reality and new ways of communication. In this sense, teachers need to identify how to foster this competence in their specific subjects, and they may decide to bring into the classroom specific digital genres. Thus, it seems necessary to consider students' point of view in a matter affecting them directly, one the one hand, to obtain representative findings about their motivation and competence regarding digital media; on the other, to take their opinions into account in our teaching and planning decisions. These ideas have driven my design of questionnaire specifically addressed to EFL learners in the Secondary Education context with the pursuit of drawing meaningful conclusions from students' answers regarding their digital competence and use of (travel) blogs.

Unlike adult generations, nowadays children and teenagers are positively considered to be natural users (digital natives) who may not need specific strategies to deal effectively with technologies. Nonetheless, tools and strategies regarding some ICTs and digital genres may need to be targeted in the classroom, specifically in the EFL classroom, to develop students' digital competence further as part of their teaching-learning process. Oxford (2013) explains that students are currently influenced by complex digital systems that lead them to grow and change in unpredictable ways, and which delineate their learning preferences, rhythms and styles. Precisely, the relevance of digital genres lies in the fact that they can serve many pedagogical or didactic and motivational purposes alike. Hence, their applicability to real-life situations and the many possibilities that they offer to teach and learn a foreign language can be perfectly combined with their amusing nature responding to students' likes.

This paper seeks to analyse Secondary Education students' attitude and motivation towards the use of the Internet, and particularly the (travel) blog, together with its subsequent potential exploitation to learn English. The study deals, therefore, with EFL learners' digital enculturation, and attempts to bring the travel blog closer to the students to improve their communicative skills. My initial hypothesis is that a digital genre like the travel blog can contribute to solving an important gap in today's Secondary Education in a two-fold way. It may turn out effective to foster students' linguistic competence in English and overall digital competence, as well as motivating by matching students' potential interests and concerns. In addition, blogs can help prompt in class contexts involving culture and values in an enticing way. These advantages should be added to the importance of blogs nowadays. Not only has their popularity dramatically increased lately with millions of blogs in platforms such as Xanga, Live Journal or Blogger (Cortés Hernández 2006), but this has happened especially using English as a vehicle to communicate globally through the Internet.

Nevertheless, to gain insights into the extent to which this digital genre should be implemented, it is first necessary for the EFL teacher to raise awareness of learners' opinions and views about digital genres, and specifically the (travel) blog in a foreign language. Scrivener (2011) affirms that it is worth considering the different IT abilities of our students before making any decisions in class. From my point of view, only after a negotiated process where students show a positive attitude towards the form and the content of new materials to be used, their potential incorporation can be conceived. This is the case of such an up-to-date digital genre like the (travel) blog and its implementation into the EFL classroom. Therefore, the research questions about students' attitude and motivation towards the (travel) blog include:

1. What is the Secondary Education students' perceived digital competence (as compared to their partners)? Are there differences regarding age or year? And regarding their use in the L1 and in the L2?

2. What do students think about (travel) blogs? How do they employ them? Are they conscious of the potentialities of this textual genre for their learning of a language?

3. Will the use of travel blogs motivate students to enhance their language learning skills? Can they, therefore, constitute a valuable resource for the EFL classroom in Secondary Education?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study presented focuses on key aspects in current language learning, namely students' motivation, their digital media literacy and the relevance of this literacy in the curriculum. Other theories and methods are offered to complement this view, for instance, concerning Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), presenting a genre-based approach towards the (travel) blog and considering the perspective of English as a Lingua Franca for our students.

Motivation is consistently a thorny issue in education. Students may increasingly show no interest in traditional methods and old-fashioned materials that do not adjust to nowadays educational and technological reality. The key to solve this situation might be found in enhancing intrinsic motivation that is not temporary and limited, but that needs to be thoughtfully nurtured. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2010) mention that motivation should not be just regarded as the initial spark any student needs to start a new task or a new course; it also refers to the maintenance of that desire through a longer period of time. For Harmer (2007) the issue of motivation is largely connected with the notion of *agency*, as "students should take some responsibility for themselves, […] be the 'doers' in class [and] feel they have some influence over what is happening, rather than always being told exactly what to do" (21). For a sustained motivation in the EFL classroom, working with (travel) blogs may be a solution.

In any case, different studies prove the difficulty of triggering intrinsic motivation in language students concerning for example their reading skills (Ho and Richards 1993; Davis, 1997). Conversely, some studies demonstrate that the digital platform of the Internet is fairly stimulating for

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students to read to a great extent (Rodzvilla 2002; Stiler & Philleo 2003). So the (travel) blog has been chosen as one of those ways to provide students with an incentive to work and learn a language different from their mother tongue. The interaction conformed by the process of reading and commenting on a particular topic triggers interesting discussions among the virtual community and respects individual differences as for interests and wants (Yang 2009). The combination of a motivating digital media with a personal implication may be fundamental to open students' eyes to the benefits of making use of a digital genre in the EFL classroom. Another effective component of (travel) blogs lies in the possibility of learners' reflection and critical thinking, exchanging data, valuing distinct experiences and sharing them with their social background. They may promote the development of higher order thinking skills, which should be emphasized when learning a foreign language.

So students' media literacy needs to be developed throughout their compulsory education. Even if students may know a great deal about digital media and some digital genres, consciousness should be fostered as for the learning advantages that they entail. In our case, (travel) blogs can create a relatively learner-centred environment in which students guide themselves in their learning and at their own pace, with the support of the teacher (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Another reason to get students digitally educated and literate through the use of digital genres like the (travel) blog is that "the virtual worlds of digital media constitute important learning contexts for language learners, with many having their first opportunities to interact in the target language online" (Hafner, Chik and Jones 2013: 812).

Furthermore, following a CLT approach in the EFL classroom –probably the most currently backed up approach– implies to think about situations where students can employ the language to communicate for a purpose (e.g. Larsen-Freeman 2000; Richards 2006; Harmer 2007). Also, authentic materials should be brought into the classroom so that learners are better prepared to effectively interact and convey their ideas outside the classroom too (e.g. Willis and Willis 1996; Peacock 1997; Widdowson 1998; Larsen-Freeman 2000; Brandl 2008). This way, they will see the usefulness of knowing another language and will be motivated to learn it. The use of some digital genres may, thus, be a great resource for EFL teachers, since it allows us to bring authenticity into the classroom and to promote communication in up-to-date real-life contexts (e.g. Crystal 2004; Richardson 2009; Luzón, Ruiz-Madrid and Villanueva 2010).

In the end, "if students get enough exposure to language, and opportunities for language use, [...] then language learning will take care of itself. [...] the focus of CLT has been on students communicating real messages, and not just grammatically controlled language" (Harmer 2007: 50). Therefore, using blogs in the EFL classroom may be planned, for instance, to improve students' reading and writing skills and interaction skills. They can read specific posts and comments from blogs to gain information about topics arousing their interest, while communicating with other English speakers. As Arnold and Ducate (2006) highlight, digital applications involving computer-mediated communication in an asynchronous way assist in promoting students' interactive learning. In this respect, blogs may lead them to do further research both in-class and out-class due to their enticing nature.

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As such, these texts may also serve as models which can be analysed making students aware of their communicative purpose and specific characteristics, following a genre-based approach (Swales 1990, 2004; Bhatia 1993, 2004). This would enable them to be aware and adequately interpret this digital genre, to recognize its texts as generic instances of a blog, and ideally to write their own posts or comments. This task can be very beneficial for them because they may potentially turn to blogs more and more as a source for information and a medium of communication with international native and non-native speakers of English.

Moreover, this would expose students to real use contexts. They would encounter blogs by international speakers, which can advantageously contribute to making them aware of English being used as a vehicle for global communication in a great number of domains (e.g. Jenkins 2007; Seidlhofer 2011; Mauranen 2012; Baker 2015). These authors regard ELF as the English language that is employed by users who may not share their L1. Thus, it is very much linked to environments of global communication such as digital media and digital genres.

3. METHODS

In this section, the questionnaire used to gather their answers is described together with the situational context in which it was applied. Concrete information about the sample of contestants is offered as well.

3.1. Data collection

To draw meaningful conclusions from my research questions, I regarded a purposefully designed questionnaire as the main measurement tool for my study. Although some existing validated scales might have been useful to analyse students' overall motivation, I truly believed that an original questionnaire could largely suit my purposes in this paper. Thus, it focuses on a concrete digital genre, the (travel) blog, and the use students make of it both in Spanish and English, adjusting more accurately to the context of the study and the students involved in it.

From the broad starting point of the overall use students make of the Internet and the digital genres, together with their consciousness of the purpose of those genres, it was my intention to limit the spectrum to questions unveiling more precise information. These concentrate on researching students' attitude, motivation and competence when it comes to (travel) blogs. As a result, four main scopes or blocks of topics grouping and combining the original questions (check Appendix 1) are here gathered, namely:

(1) students' habits and tendencies when surfing the Internet for different purposes such as reading articles or news and looking for information before a journey.

(2) students' awareness and ability to use a blog, as well as the frequency of their use both in their mother tongue and in English as L2.

(3) students' personal perception of their competence in blogs when contrasted with their peers, and why and to what extent they employ this digital genre.

(4) students' opinions as regards the introduction of blogs in the EFL classroom, specifying which areas and skills students think can be enhanced thanks to them.

The questions are formulated in a rather closed way to obtain informative answers and to ease the students' task of reflecting about their own habits and preferences. They are also more or less personal to make the learner feel listened to and taken into consideration. The goal behind this choice is to provoke, hopefully, their truthful reactions and to verbalize their probably silenced complaints and suggestions regarding this topic. In general, I considered it to be of great use to reckon variables such as the difference of age, the diversity of interests, the digital competence itself or the experience when it comes to trips. They indeed can play a crucial role in students' perspectives and intrinsic motivation to make use of the Internet and travel blogs in particular in the EFL classroom.

The questionnaire was written and delivered in Spanish for the sake of understanding, comfort and self-confidence when answering, as well as for the potential applicability of the blog to foster learning in other subjects. The original questions (Appendix 1) have been translated into English in the results section for the reader to follow the figures and the discussion easily.

3.2. Sample of participants

The sample of students to whom the questionnaires were administered consists of 99 subjects (=39 1st and 2nd year *ESO* students and 60 *Bachillerato* students) from a public high school in Zaragoza, who answered voluntarily and anonymously. Participants are, on the one hand, 12 and 13 years old, and on the other, 17 or 18, and this contrast between the beginning and the last stages of their Secondary Education is thought to be revealing for the study. Looking at age and developmental differences between these groups of students would enable me to gain insights into the changes concerning their tendencies and preferences in the Internet and in the EFL classroom. Ideally, the overall results could be a great basis on which to suggest possible pedagogical applications and to ground tasks and lessons involving digital genres, and specifically travel blogs.

Despite having been carried out with a convenience sampling, this survey study can be regarded as a replicable one, insofar as it has taken place in a public high school in a middle socio-economic area in a big monolingual city. Even when significant results cannot be achieved due to the small sample of contestants, it may be claimed that this sample is prototypical of the Spanish Secondary Education students. Moreover, the study presents a high degree of internal validity, as the instrument of research really investigates the purpose of the study. It also demonstrates credibility, since the line of thought as for the results and discussions is coherently followed from a broader spectrum to more specific data, as commented above.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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In general, the most relevant findings regarding 1st/2nd year *ESO* and *Bachillerato* students' answers to my queries show an initial lack of awareness at the earlier stage that prevents students from making the most of blogs and fully exploiting their possibilities either in their L1 or L2. There is quite a change, if we move to the students' later educational stage, perhaps promoted by the reinforcement of the digital literacies of the learners during their whole educational period. Additionally, this positive change may be potentially supported by more ambitious interests and motivation for future challenges because of students' age, maturity and development. Apart from that, students supporting the implementation of the blog in their education outnumber students who reject it, as will be shown in detail below.

The results obtained from students' answers to my questions introduced in the Methods section of this paper will be presented via graphics that aim to show visually where the main points of interest lie in order to respond to my research questions.

4.1. Students' use of the internet and digital media

As regards the first section of the questionnaire, students were asked about their regular use of the Internet and digital genres.
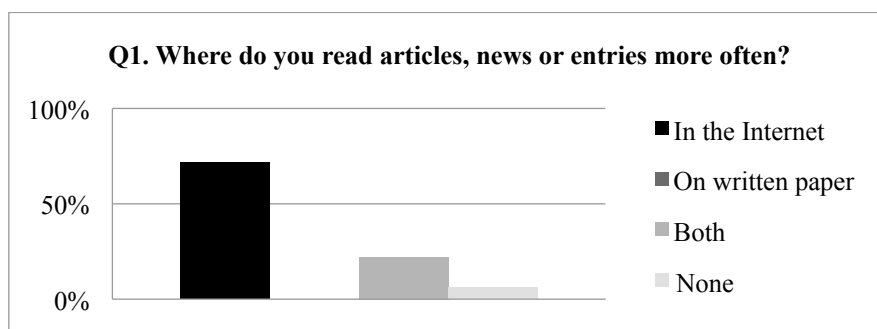

Figure 1. Platforms and media where students tend to read instances of different genres more often on a daily basis.

It is striking that more than 70% of the total of students agree that it is the Internet the current vehicle they frequently take advantage of when they look for information in the form of a piece of news, an article, etc. (see Figure 1). Also relevant is that none of the students who answered the questionnaire opted to mark the written paper itself as a usual means of getting information. Such an option is not contemplated in isolation, but just in combination with the Internet one.

In accordance with the previous finding, question 1b. *(¿Crees que utilizas Internet cada vez más como medio de información? Do you believe that you use Internet more and more as a source of information?)* was devised for those students who answered that they used the Internet or both the Internet and the written paper more than before. 85% claim that they employ the Internet more and more as the main medium for information, whereas just 15% answered that their use of the Internet is not increasing.

This panorama shows that the Internet in general, and digital genres in particular, need to be included in the EFL classroom from the first years of Secondary Education, as it is their usual means

of receiving information in their daily lives. It is thus necessary to lead them into the process to search for information, to be critical and to find alternative ways in digital genres that plausibly will assist them in their communicative purposes.

I was particularly interested in how students find information, and if they use digital media, when they plan to travel so as to gain insights into whether and how the travel blog could be exploited in a CLT EFL classroom. Figure 2 presents results regarding how often they consult web-based information, mostly the Internet in general and travel blogs in particular. In the original question there were other possible options, but the graph below concentrates on those two to adjust to the focus of the study.
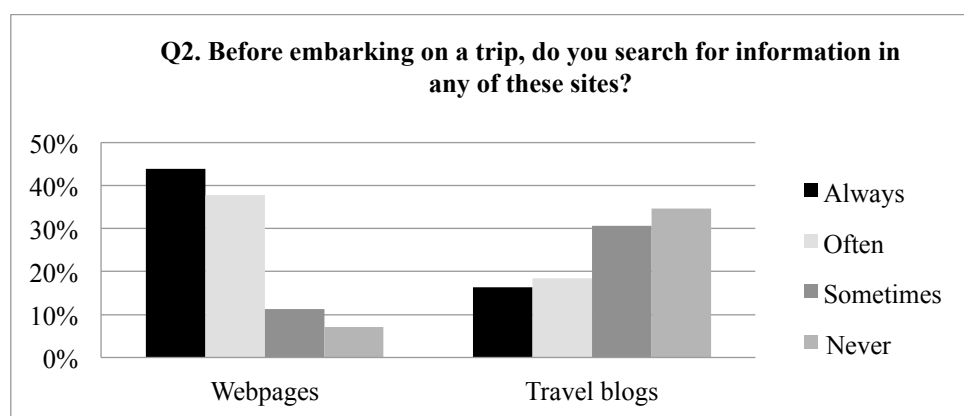

Figure 2. Where and how often students search for information before embarking on a trip.

Even if students consider the Internet as a useful resource to find information about travelling in general, they do not specifically consult travel blogs. This may point at some lack of knowledge of the specific type of digital formats and texts at their disposal to get specific, meaningful information for them. That is to say, teenagers may have a notion of the web, but quite certainly they may not be aware of the different digital genres housed in it.

4.2. Use of and attitude towards (travel) blogs

Having foreseen this possible lack of awareness of the genre, specific questions were posed on the students' perceived knowledge of the (travel) blog.
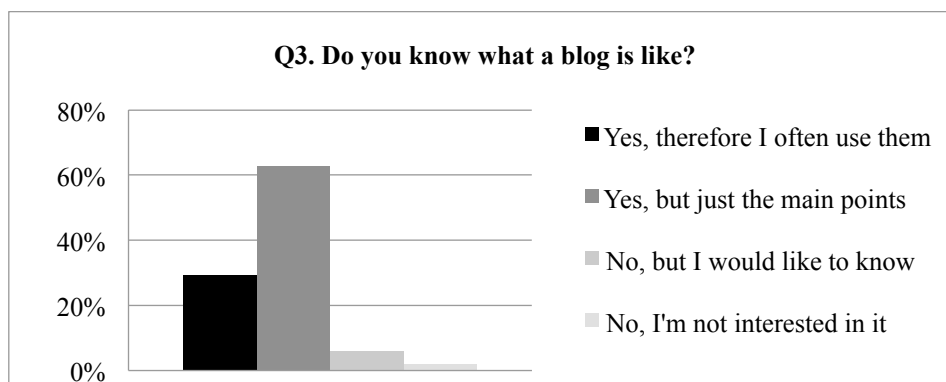

Figure 3. Students' perceptions of their knowledge regarding the form and content of a blog.

Only 29% learners say they know how to use a blog and often make use of them regardless of the purposes or interests (Figure 3). By contrast, 63% admit that, despite having some basic ideas about their nature or form, they only know about their main features. This reflects that they may be involved in the world of technology and are aware of new ways of communication, but that they probably need to improve their digital competence, when it comes to operative, semiotic, cultural and civic dimensions. Respectively, first of all, students in the EFL classroom can also learn how to use technology effectively when searching for specific information or targeting communication in English. Secondly, they need to assimilate and understand all the different media and languages that converge in the Internet platform. Thirdly, they have to be prepared to encounter a new environment presenting intellectual and social differences within the digital community. And, finally, they can also learn how to assume the rights and the duties that technologies provide us with to make a responsible use of them both in the classroom and in their daily life (Pérez Tornero 2004).

Adding the percentages of the students who stated that they know blogs to a greater or smaller extent (see the first two columns in Figure 3), it is easy to realise that teachers should reconsider their assumptions related to students' digital nativeness and their digital literacy. Instead, teachers have plenty of work to do by monitoring and developing learners' skills and knowledge about the overwhelmingly used platform of the blogosphere. This, furthermore, would be in line with some key competences in the Spanish curriculum that should be incorporated in all areas in a cross-curricular manner, specifically the digital competence per se. Actually, they will be a really good basis upon which other key competences such as the learning to learn competence or the social and civic competence can be built.

2% of the students asked show no interest at all in learning how to use blogs properly and recognize their functions and potentialities (as shown in Figure 3). Even if this is a low percentage, these students should let us know why this may be so, so that we can duly respond to their likely lack of motivation in view of their perceptions. Teachers should try to lead them to see the usefulness of information and specific digital genres they may not have discovered yet. Learners' attention should be drawn to positive aspects of employing (travel) blogs, for instance, the authenticity of their language, their utility for the future, their potentially amusing nature, and the advantages they may offer for students to become more autonomous and self-sufficient when learning a language.

Answers regarding their actual use of this genre were, coherently, not different from the ones explained above, and showed low levels in general when employing blogs, but slightly higher figures in terms of reception than of production of this digital genre (see Table 1).

	Once a day	Once a week	Once a month	Never
Do you read blogs in English?	3%	17%	25%	65%
Do you read blogs in Spanish?	11%	35%	30%	23%
Do you write comments in English?	0%	5%	9%	86%

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Do you write comments in Spanish?	3%	7%	14%	76%
Do you write posts in English?	2%	3%	3%	92%
Do you write posts in Spanish?	4%	11%	10%	75%

Table 1. Frequency of students' reported reading and writing of blogs in their L1 or in L2 (English).

Following the same line mentioned so far, one of the most relevant variables for students not to place more emphasis on the receptive and productive use of blogs has to do with their likely lack of genre-awareness. Hand in hand, the enculturation into digital formats and texts should be developed in an attempt to progress their digital literacies.

Consequently, the process students undergo when reading and using the blog can be fairly traced. Together with the overwhelming exposure to an unknown genre, the underlying reasons for levels of production not to be higher may also have to do with the lack of interesting ideas. Shyness of showing their take on posts or comments they have read may also play a crucial role influenced by variables such as physical or cognitive age or scope of experiences, along with emotional and personal features. In other words, even if they may read more or less at ease about a plethora of topics, when it is their turn to contribute to the discussion or give their opinions –making a productive use of both the language and the technologies–, they find more barriers on the way. This may prevent them from establishing fruitful connections with what they have just read about and from using the language to communicate internationally.

Secondly, they naturally feel safer when their L1 comes into play. In spite of the genre-related limitation, it is true that in such a case they have no specific limitations to unconsciously recall and employ vocabulary or grammar of that L1, unlike in the L2. That would explain the large differences between the languages when it comes to making a receptive and, especially, a productive use of the genre: 17% students read a blog in English a week as opposed to 35% who do it in Spanish; 65% affirm they never read blogs in English, and the percentage sinks to 23% when considering them written in their native tongue. In any case, the issue beneath the low interaction with blogs may account for bearing in mind the likely scarce knowledge and reflection on its features, its possibilities and its applicabilities.

So, once aware of the situation involving students' passive and active participation in the blogosphere, I wondered about the reported actual uses students make of blogs of any sort.
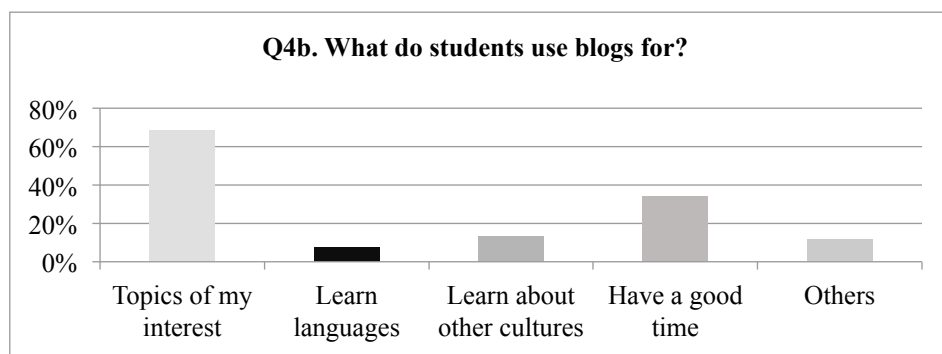

Q4b. What do students use blogs for?

Figure 4. Frequent uses students tend to make of blogs of any sort.

Two conclusions can be pinpointed according to the data retrieved and presented in Figure 4. The fact that students see in blogs resources to deepen their knowledge about issues they are keen on (69%) may implicitly presuppose their willingness to enhance their knowledge about this genre. Moreover, it turns out to be consistent with the fact that they also have a good time when making use of blogs (34%).

In contrast, it is worrying that learners do not value blogs highly as materials to learn other languages, customs or cultures. This finding may reinforce once again a combination of scarce information about the potential advantages of this digital genre with a poor deployment of it that impedes acknowledging further benefits. Thus, the teacher's task continues to be to depict a whole picture for their students to see new forms of communication in English, new ways of learning and potential roads leading to use the language to communicate. Seemingly, it is also relevant to develop autonomous learning, particularly in English, and the culture and values surrounding that diverse community of speakers. As claimed in previous sections, precisely because of their nature, blogs written in English by speakers of multiple languages using it as a lingua franca can be wonderful resources to bring into the classroom examples of authentic language in context used in global communication. What is more, blogs may trigger opportunities for the implementation of reinforcing activities and tasks which help learners improve their communicative competence.

4.3. Learners' self-perception of digital competence

Another interesting line to delve into comprises the students' perception of their digital competence and, specifically as compared to their peers. That is why in the questionnaire students were asked to value how they saw themselves in the use of blogs as opposed to their classmates. In this case it was particularly interesting to explore the extent to which their perception varied from the early stages in high school to the last part of that educational period in order to check the potential evolution of that competence and, as a result, of the students' awareness of it.
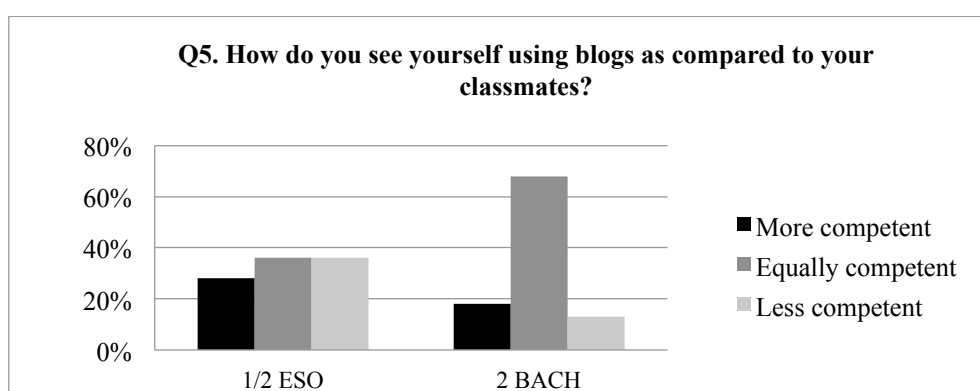
Figure 5. Students' perceptions of their competence in the use of blogs (relative to classmates).

Generally, few students feel confident enough to claim they are more competent than their classmates (28% and 18% in the compared educational stages, respectively). Nonetheless, the number of students answering they are less competent does diminish when we move from the initial years to

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the final one in *Bachillerato* –from 36% to 13%. So there is an improvement of their perceived ability to cope with technology reflected in a better perception of what they are capable of doing and how. This can be seen in their self-confidence to assure they are not worse at it than their classmates. Some of the problems caused by the various genres available in the Internet might have disappeared at this point, so there may be a greater need to focus on the students' digital literacies at early stages in Secondary Education.

4.4. Views on the implementation of the blog in the EFL classroom

To continue with the transition from the blog as a specific digital genre in the broad paradigm of the Internet to its inclusion in the EFL classroom, the next question focuses on students' perception in this respect. It refers to whether they would incorporate this source of teaching and, above all, learning, or they prefer to leave it out –be it to stick to the traditional classroom or to seek for other alternatives and new materials.
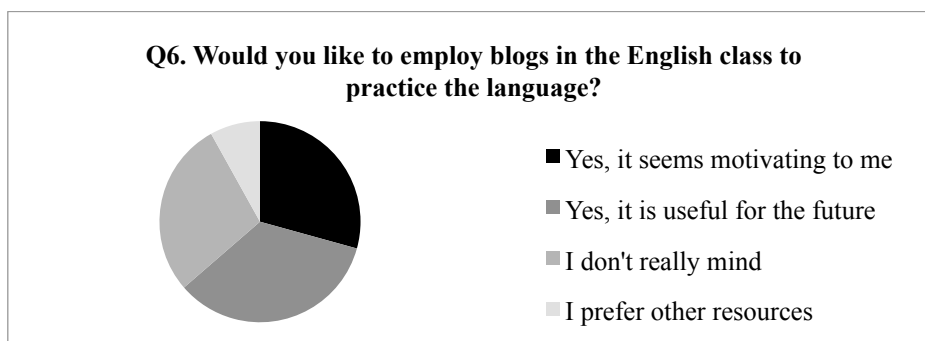

Q6. Would you like to employ blogs in the English class to practice the language?

■ Yes, it seems motivating to me
■ Yes, it is useful for the future
▪ I don't really mind
▫ I prefer other resources

Figure 6. Students' preferences and reasons about making use of blogs in the English classroom.

Clearly the results show that most of the students have no objection to make it part of the classroom materials (see Figure 6). Indeed, 29% students consider the blog to be motivating and funny, and, even more, 34% believe that it would be useful for their future. Accordingly, blogs can actually be a good innovative tool for teachers to help learners develop not only learners' communicative competence but also digital competences in the EFL classroom. At the other end, 8% learners would rather use other resources in the English classroom. Next step is to ask ourselves and these students if this preference has something to do with the superficial knowledge about the genre they may have, as has been discussed, and/or with low self-perceptions of digital competence leading to fear of being exposed to technology in the (EFL) classroom environment.

Given the potentiality of the use of blogs in the EFL classroom, I attempted to explore students' views regarding the areas or skills they considered could be improved by the use of English blogs.

Q6b. Which aspects of English language do you think you can improve more with blogs?
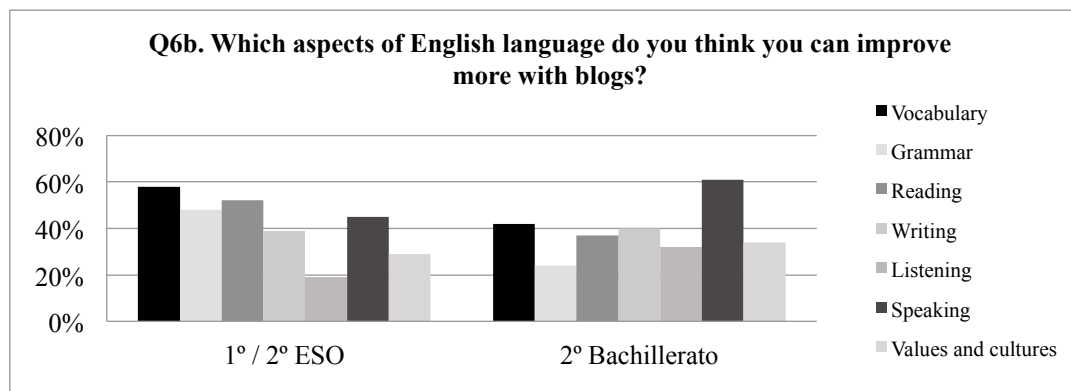

Figure 7. Areas or skills that students think they can practice, learn or improve more thanks to the possibilities blogs offer.

As can be seen in Figure 7, during the first years of Secondary Education, students see in the blogs a potentially rewarding tool to extend their vocabulary knowledge. Due to the variety of topics and the descriptive nature of the entries in many cases, they seem to indicate that by reading blogs and making the most of them, it would be easier for them to learn new words or even idioms and expressions that English native and non-native speakers tend to use. Much in the same way, it is perceived that students believe blogs could be a really helpful platform to concentrate on grammar, since almost 35% consider them a good option for it. It is possible to work on structures and tenses used for real purposes displaying authentic use of the language in the entries and the comments, and students can observe real-life examples of how English is used.

On the other hand, students at the latest stages of Secondary Education think that speaking would be the skill or the area in which they can deepen their knowledge and strategies and practice further if travel blogs were used in the classroom. Perhaps, this finding might have its ground in that students have already paid a lot of attention to vocabulary and grammar throughout their Secondary Education (as seen with the data retrieved from those early students). Therefore, blogs can be seen as a basis to work on other macroskills, e.g. speaking and interaction skills by developing their conversation and discussion skills around a topic of their interest; reading skills by looking for further information thanks to hypertexts; or writing skills by getting in contact with the author of the entry or the people that comment on it. Another feasible reason for this perception on the part of students may have to do with the fact that students miss speaking activities in their EFL classes, which tend to be frequently focused on the written skills, especially due to the washback effect of the University entrance examination, which is centered exclusively on written skills. It may be the case that they realize they have not sufficiently practiced the language communicatively, so they might consider blogs a potential source to foster discussion and interaction.

Finally, it should be highlighted that values and cultures are not regarded as a key aspect that could be enhanced by exploiting travel blogs in the EFL classroom. Naturally, more emphasis should be placed on this matter, insofar as intercultural awareness is a current, necessary issue in global communication. Greater importance should be given to the opportunity this digital genre can offer to know more about customs, traditions or writing conventions of diverse places and speakers, which

would lead to improve their general knowledge and their intercultural competence. In other words, EFL teachers could be easily contributing to developing cross-curricular topics such as the ethical and critical perspective or cultural awareness and respect.

4.5. Students' perceptions

Lastly, some students included their open comments at the end of the questionnaire, giving me the chance to make a qualitative reflection on the process of this questionnaire and, by extension, the influence teachers have on their learning environment and their learning process.

(1) *"Usar blogs puede ser más entretenido, y quizás nos ayudaría mucho"* ["Using blogs can be more entertaining, and maybe it would help us a lot"].

(2) *"Me parece chula la pregunta sobre si nos gustaría emplear en clase de inglés blogs para practicar la lengua"* ["I think the question about whether we would like to use blogs in the English classroom to practise the language is cool"].

(3) *"Me parece interesante"* ["It seems interesting to me"].

These three comments have been extracted to generalise about a relevant phenomenon in the classroom and the teacher-student relationship: the learner's natural and responsible implication in their process of learning will be higher if they are engaged and can negotiate about it. During the process of answering this questionnaire, all students demonstrated really positive attitudes and behaviours, willingly participating in my study. In other words, they showed engagement in answering each and every question included, some students even deciding to write some anonymous open comments and showing a lot of interest in the topic. What is more, the line of the answers highlighting the positive implications of and the agreement with using blogs in the EFL classroom has to make teachers aware of the fact that involving students in the teaching-learning process and in their personal decisions can be very beneficial.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Asking students about their ideas and views and making them participate in their own learning can inherently trigger greater intrinsic motivation and expectations. This can happen as for themselves, but also as for their learning opportunities, overall improving the class environment. If teachers expect to demand students to take it seriously, students should be taken into account in the decision of what they need to learn, how and what for. This ought to be so precisely because they like being asked, and not be left behind. They should actually be the protagonists of the teaching-learning process, therefore, teachers should use this and further tools to make them part of their planning.

On their part, teachers have a great deal of work to do by monitoring and developing learners' skills and knowledge of English as used to communicate and of the overwhelming platform of the blogosphere. As shown by the findings, students prefer reading in digital platforms and feel more and more comfortable by having lots of information at just a couple of clicks. They tend to employ digital

genres like the blog more frequently in their L1 than L2, but are generally willing to learn more about them and exploit them in English for other purposes. What derives from these conclusions answering research question 2 is that digital resources should anyway be brought into the EFL classroom (and likely into the classroom of other subjects). It would be very beneficial to strike a balance between their particular drives to search in the Internet and its platforms and the learning of doing so in a conscious and responsible manner. Having a greater variety of tools available in class, which they are also fond of, is key to complement materials and textbooks following the legal provisions and to adjust to students' likes and habits of communicating.

Nevertheless, most students need to feel a little bit more competent in the use of the Internet, and still cannot claim to control and be aware of all the processes and possibilities that digital genres such as the blog entail (responding to research question 1 on their perceived digital competence). This lack of awareness is especially so as regards their enhancement of their communicative competence in English. In any case, it is important to develop students' digital competence further and emphasize the advantages and drawbacks of technologies and Internet communication. And this should be done both at the early and late stages of Secondary Education. Maybe educational communities are nowadays doing their best to engage the yearly new Secondary School students to make sure and guarantee their appropriate progress in media literacy throughout the years. However, we should not forget that knowledge and skills regarding technology become rapidly obsolete, so we should work with elder students to develop new habits, to adapt to the countless innovations that are taking place and to assure a critical point of view together with the operative use of the Internet (Pérez Tornero 2004).

Furthermore, making use of digital genres in general and of blogs in particular in the Secondary Education EFL classroom would be in line with some key competences in the Secondary Education legal provisions and the curriculum that should be incorporated in all areas in a cross-curricular manner. Indeed, the introduction of a resource like the blog in the English classroom at Secondary Education may contribute to responding to specific and key competences, and may match students' needs and interests, providing authenticity of materials. The example of travel blogs can be useful both in highlighting topics that may enhance students' intrinsic motivation and in including some of the contents prescribed in the curriculum. Another great benefit lies in the fact that it allows students to work on their abilities and concerns so as to learn to learn, and find out a worldwide practical tool which is the English language to face their personal, social and professional future. Thus, the validity of the blog as a resource (research question 3) has been positively confirmed. Not only do students think that their potential applicability and likeableness in the EFL classroom is feasible, but they also back up both the didactic and the motivational nature of this digital textual genre.

Hence, it can be stated that blogs themselves can be used in class or at home as an appropriate way of developing key competences, such as the digital one, as discussed above, and also specific competences for EFL learning. For instance, they can carry out extensive reading and written tasks where interaction and communication is altogether real and meaningful. Students can be asked to complete tasks for which they need to read posts and/or responding to them, or find the most useful travel blog to prepare a trip to a given place. Additionally, working from a genre-based approach, learners can learn how to organize ideas and texts from reading and when writing, and they can

perceive how they are addressed as readers by the author of a text. Subsequently, they should address such wide audience the blogosphere entails in a similar fitting way. Moreover, blogs can also serve to enhance students' learning to learn competence and autonomous learning in various equally challenging and motivating ways.

For future venues, we should perhaps question if the same type of studies regarding other increasingly common digital genres used by students in the Internet (such as, for instance, tutorials in YouTube, podcasts or fora) are also suitable nowadays. What seems clear from this study is that blogs are a useful source, according to students, to open paths for their motivation in learning English and for their overall English language development and improvement. This is generally a positive direction for further innovation and research if we strive for effectiveness in our EFL teaching and our students' learning.

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APPENDIX

Facultad de Educación
Universidad Zaragoza

Este cuestionario tiene por objetivo conocer las aptitudes y actitudes de los alumnos de Educación Secundaria en cuanto a su competencia digital, y más específicamente sus hábitos y perspectivas sobre el género del blog. Para ello, se precisa de la ayuda de alumnos que contesten a las preguntas de manera voluntaria y totalmente anónima a fin de poder obtener resultados representativos que nos guíen en nuestra investigación.

BLOGS: EL USO DE INTERNET Y SU FUNCIÓN EN EL AULA

1. ¿Dónde lees artículos, noticias o entradas más a menudo?

☐ En Internet   ☐ En papel impreso   ☐ Ambas   ☐ Ninguna

Si has incluido INTERNET entre tus respuestas pasa a 1b. Si no, continúa en 2.

    1b. ¿Crees que lo utilizas cada vez más como medio de información?

    ☐ Sí   ☐ No

2. Antes de hacer un viaje, ¿buscas información en algunos de estos sitios?

- Catálogos de viajes	☐ Siempre	☐ Con frecuencia	☐ A veces	☐ Nunca
- Artículos de revistas	☐ Siempre	☐ Con frecuencia	☐ A veces	☐ Nunca
- Blogs de viajes	☐ Siempre	☐ Con frecuencia	☐ A veces	☐ Nunca
- Páginas web en general	☐ Siempre	☐ Con frecuencia	☐ A veces	☐ Nunca
- Gente de mi entorno	☐ Siempre	☐ Con frecuencia	☐ A veces	☐ Nunca
- Otros: _____	☐ Siempre	☐ Con frecuencia	☐ A veces	☐ Nunca

3. ¿Sabes qué es un blog?

☐ Sí, y por eso los uso a menudo   ☐ Sí, pero sólo lo principal

☐ No, pero me gustaría saber   ☐ No, porque no me interesa.

4. ¿Con qué frecuencia…

• … lees blogs en inglés?

☐ Una vez al día   ☐ Una vez a la semana   ☐ Una vez al mes   ☐ Nunca

• … lees blogs en español?

☐ Una vez al día   ☐ Una vez a la semana   ☐ Una vez al mes   ☐ Nunca

• … escribes comentarios en algún blog en inglés?

☐ Una vez al día   ☐ Una vez a la semana   ☐ Una vez al mes   ☐ Nunca

• …escribes comentarios en algún blog en español?

☐ Una vez al día ☐ Una vez a la semana ☐ Una vez al mes ☐ Nunca

• … escribes entradas en algún blog en inglés?

☐ Una vez al día ☐ Una vez a la semana ☐ Una vez al mes ☐ Nunca

• …escribes entradas en algún blog en español?

☐ Una vez al día ☐ Una vez a la semana ☐ Una vez al mes ☐ Nunca

Si NO has respondido NUNCA en todas las anteriores,

4b. ¿Para qué utilizas los blogs, sea cual sea el uso que haces? Puedes marcar tantas casillas como desees.

☐ Informarme sobre temas que me gustan ☐ Aprender un nuevo idioma

☐ Aprender nuevas culturas ☐ Pasar un rato divertido

Otros: _____

5. ¿Cómo te ves en el uso de blogs con respecto a tus compañeros/amigos?

☐ Más competente.

☐ Igual que mis compañeros.

☐ Menos competente.

6. ¿Te gustaría emplear en clase de inglés blogs para practicar la lengua?

☐ Sí, es motivante y divertido ☐ Sí, es útil para el futuro

☐ Me es indiferente ☐ No, prefiero otros recursos

Si tu respuesta ha sido SÍ, continúa en 6b, por favor.

6b. ¿Qué aspectos de la lengua inglesa crees que puedes mejorar más? Marca aquellas que consideres oportunas.

☐ Practicar vocabulario ☐ Practicar gramática

☐ Practicar comprensión lectora (*Reading*) ☐ Practicar escritura (*Writing*)

☐ Practicar comprensión auditiva (*Listening*) ☐ Practicar expresión oral (*Speaking*)

☐ Aprender otros valores y culturas ☐ Otros: _____

Si quieres añadir algún comentario sobre los aspectos relacionados con este cuestionario, puedes hacerlo a continuación.

Muchas gracias por tu colaboración

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