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Travel Blog as an ESL Teaching Tool

Abstract

Current stage of ICT development necessitates the improvement of teaching tools, skills, and learning outcomes. The article discusses bright educational prospects of travel blogging for students of English as a second language (ESL). The authors suggest a short theoretical overview of research into travel blogosphere's educational opportunities, while discussing a classification of travel blogs according to the type of sender vs receiver communication. On a wide and modern textual material the article considers such prominent features of travel storytelling as polysemantic vocabulary, compact meaning representation, strategies to present cultural information and verbal creativity which can be of true interest for students of B2 level and above. The readers can also learn about a few forms of activity with travel stories which are individual special sampling with some specific focus (pun, irony, creative instances of word building), presentation of foreign culture by means of English, project work for a small group of enthusiasts, sampling stories by country, by area or by activity, and presenting one concise story to the classroom, as their own post or a paper brochure.

Key words: travel blog, English language teaching, rich semantics, verbal creativity, cultural reality

The Research Problem

New stage of ICT development offers new resources, new forms of teacher-student collaboration, which open new opportunities, among others, the following: alternative sources of information help keep curricula updated; teacher ceases to be the sole source of knowledge and understanding, thus students demonstrate their potential easier, democratic nature of collaborative learning contributes to the formation of democratic principles and values, which in turn are necessary for democratic society to function properly (Morze, Pavlova, Makhahchashvili, & Smyrnova-Trybulska, 2016, pp. 201–202).

Noskova, Pavlova and Yakovleva stress the role of social media and social learning as a realm where one can find a lot of opportunities for educational advancement. The authors stress that it is not sufficient to merely reproduce different levels (systems) of interactions between learners in the digital learning environment, but rather endeavour to accelerate the development of new skills by using new technologies (Noskova, Pavlova, & Yakovleva, 2018, p.114).

Social learning is widely discussed as it represents a type of informal learning. Stodd and Reitz argue that it is quite often based on some particular experiences and it is likely to be organised by communities of interest. This is a deeply personal environment that can become a fruitful source of learning (Stodd & Reitz, 2019, p. 269).

Educational Prospects of Travel Blogging

General overview of the travel blog genre. Nowadays, due to the development of ICTs, modern Internet users develop so-called *clip thinking*. This collage perception of reality becomes an undeniable fact and influences the evolution of such a well-known genre as the adventure essay, which in today's technological realities is called the travel blog. In terms of the origin of information, travel blogs belong to user-generated content (UGC), which is a representative of the genres of Web 2.0 (Cox et al., 2008). Being truly personal in terms of sharing knowledge, travel blogs can be considered a vivid example of social learning practice.

Interestingly, the role of personal contribution and shared interests become more and more meaningful in modern media-enhanced communication. Forecasting teaching and learning trends for 2020–2030, the European Commission presented blogs and other multimedia content as credible sources of information

for scholars (Education in Europe). The very concept of credibility of information changes the moment it is published online. Currently travel blog as a literary genre is undergoing transformation as well. Travel blogs used to be much more uniform in terms of communicative purposes. Now, however, it is no longer a static entity with its defined purposes and constraints, but rather a changeable and dynamic medium adjusting its purposes to the audience. When it comes to online mode, travel blog as a digital genre takes into account the users' needs and reflects new contexts (Pascual, 2019, p. 161).

The research objective. In university teaching the use of Internet blogging as a general trend opens wide opportunities for enrichment and upgrading teaching of various disciplines (Poznanska & Romaniukha, 2017, p. 57). Connection and feedback loop sustaining between members of a travel-blogging platform in terms of social communication were already researched (Vasiliki & Kostas, 2009). Travel blogs, in particular, are emerging as an effective tool for improving speaking skills due to the modernity, accessibility, and authenticity of language material. Blogs can be used to teach English, as well as engaging in multidisciplinary humanities courses where students are able to potentially develop critical thinking skills (Pascual, 2019, p. 158). Discussing educational affordances of travel stories seems to be a popular topic of contemporary educational debate but in this article we would like to outline the most distinctive linguistic traits of travel blogs, exemplified by authentic textual pieces and to suggest forms of class or individual language-learning activities.

Before going into the specific features of an adventure blog, let us suggest a definition of blogs as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological order” (Herring et al., 2005, p. 142).

The pre-history of modern adventure blog (travel blog or travelogue) obviously dates back to the genre of traveler notes, which has its own history. Traveler notes is an independent literary genre, with genre leeway, the dominant role of the author, the abundance of documentary elements along with artistic fiction, genre syncretism, which results in a combination of elements of other genres. Each traveler story is unique, since it reflects the cognitive style of the author or authors.

In addition, travel blog is an element of intercultural communication because it is formed by representatives of different cultures and is dedicated to a broad audience that uses English as a medium to learn about the specifics of other cultures. Moreover, travel blog stands out due to a few recognisable traits – it is entertaining, informal, lively, and informative.

Travel Blogs in Language Teaching

Types of travel blogs. A glimpse into the variety of travel blogs allows us to classify them according to the type of sender. Vasiliki and Kostas outlined the general classification with a focus on expertise of the author. According to them, blogosphere in tourism takes many forms. First of all, it contains business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) blogs, then government-to-consumer blogs (G2C) and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) blogs (Vasiliki & Kostas, 2009, p. 642).

Since this article is mainly concerned with language teaching aspects, let us dig a bit deeper into the kinds that are focused on the end user – the consumer, particularly, a student of English as a second language who also happens to be a passionate traveler. Listed below are a few more detailed consumer-focused blogs according to the type of sender.

In the category **business-to-consumer (B2C)** one can observe two main kinds of blogs. Both are exemplified by businesses – tourist accommodation booking websites:

- Corporate blog with hidden personal details of the author, limited or non-existent feedback option from readers, for example, the travel articles compiled by Booking.com (<https://www.booking.com/articles.html>).
- Corporate blog with open feedback option, updated by a few authors, presumably working on part-time contracts with the agency, thus, reflecting general company policy and advertising the accommodation as well as the services of the agency, for example, the travel blog of a more affordable accommodation platform Hostelworld.

Both of the mentioned sources present travel advice that is extremely user-friendly: multimodal (containing hyperlinks, images, bright colours), informal in terms of language, and quite engaging.

Another group of travel blogs (**consumer-to-consumer type (C2C)**) targeted at the consumer can be formed according to technological aspects of their creation and publishing:

- Public travel blog platforms or networks, such as: travelblog.org, travelark.org, travellerspoint.com, getjealous.com, realtravelblog.com, and travelpost.com specialise in hosting individual travel blogs, and for that reason save their authors' web-designing efforts, but at the same time they render presentations more or less uniform.
- Websites designed single-handedly, a collection of this kind can easily be found online, for example (Morilla, 2019), a truly demanding activity, allowing the author to demonstrate not only linguistic creativity in writing, but also web-designing skills while presenting their travel advice.

When we look at social communication present in travel blogs, whether they allow feedback communication or not, we assume social communication of this kind is efficient when the sender and the receiver share the axiomatic categories of self-identification, activity, goals, values, and resources (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 32). We suggest that linguistic and pragmatic aspects of this communication derive from the above-mentioned factors, even if the communicators are at different language levels. Relying on the corpus of travel stories processed, one can speculate on a generalised self-portrait of a travel blogger and their readers: “I am someone who enjoys the vibe of social life, I love to have fun and am able to enjoy small things, I love to live new experiences, cuisine, nature, and learn about cultural patterns, I would love to see the whole world but I do not have much money.”

Outlined below are the main linguistics aspects of travel blogs in English that students can observe and use in their own speech practices.

The Research Results: Semantic-Stylistic Features of Travel Stories

Polysemantic vocabulary. Travel blogs, belonging to mass media in broad sense, fulfil the same communicative functions: to entertain the audience and to spare readers’ efforts. Here the travel blog is very similar to printed press – in addition to the clichés, trite metaphors, the genre’s economy is manifested by the use of high-frequency vocabulary with broad semantics, most often represented by nouns, for example, *thing, environment, match, vibe, buzz, fix*:

*We stay in hostels to meet other people and make new friends. As a couple, you sometimes get stuck doing **your own thing**, so it’s sometimes nice to stay at a place where you know you’ll meet new people!* (Whitaker, 2018).
*We absolutely love that hostels always have a community **environment*** (Griffiths, 2018).

Another group of vocabulary with rich semantics are verbs, which represent an opulent source of research in terms of contextual meaning change, for instance, *to live, be exposed to, share, experience* etc.. By inviting students to study the grammatical structure of these sentences and focusing them on not so typical objects of these high-frequency verbs professors help develop students’ mental flexibility when they are learning new English vocabulary and trying to use it in their own expressions:

*When you stay in a hotel you limit your travel experience and don't **really live** everything the city has to offer. (Whitaker, 2018)*

*Lisbon, we wish we knew how to **quit** you. It started with a cheeky city break, nothing serious. We came back with a tan and some of those little custard tarts. Next thing we know we're spending hours on Instagram stalking #lisbon, and begging our boss to relocate Hostelworld HQ. And it seems we're not the only ones; everybody's obsessed with Lisbon right now. It's a city that will steal your heart, and leave you hungry for more. (Dutton, 2019)*

The tasks ordered to students in relation to the said rich semantics may involve focused research into the contextual meaning of these units or rendering the specific aspect of meaning into their native languages. Students of translation courses specifically could improve their written translation skills and as well as paraphrasing skills.

Compact meaning representation in English. The amount of information published by contemporary mass media on a daily basis is impressive, but at the same time each publication is limited in terms of space on the screen or the duration (for video reporting) due to economic reasons and aiming to publish storylines in concise form. Thus, in order to meet these two goals the authors present a large amount of information only implicitly, relying on readers' rich background knowledge and therefore resort to mechanisms of semantic compression. Mendzherytskaya notes that for the full grasp of information it is crucial for the so-called cognitive bases or background knowledge of communication participants to intersect in this particular language community (Mendzherytskaya, 2006, p. 52). In other words, in order to properly interpret implicit meanings from the media the addressee must have developed some background knowledge in various topics.

When communication takes place at the junction of different cultures, these implicit meanings are much more difficult to interpret because the representative of a different linguistic and cultural environment needs to activate not only linguistic knowledge, but also the cultural knowledge about this particular foreign community.

An example below contains a nomination of a specific type of modern traveller who enjoys short city breaks over the weekend – *a five to niner*. The interpretation might take a non-English speaker some time due to metonymic compression of meaning. Metonymy comes from numerals 5 and 9, denoting, respectively, the time when the working week ends on Friday afternoon and the time when the working week starts on Monday morning. Relying on resources of English word-formation, an attentive language learner might be prompted by the functions of suffix *-er*,

implying, among other interpretations, the doer, the person – an employee with specific focus on their free time over the weekend:

*Often snap-packers don't even use any of their precious time off, choosing instead to head out on a micro adventures straight after work on a Friday, returning just in time for that glorious Monday morning commute. These weekend warriors are rapidly growing in number, and are affectionately known as “**Five to Niners**.” It's incredible how easy nowadays, with all the affordable short-notice flights and hostel beds available! (Why bite-sized backpacking...)*

Compact meaning presentation may rely on various processes of word-formation (in the passages below shortening, nominalization and compounding), all of them bringing intellectual pleasure to the students from decoding the unusual form and potentially stimulating their cognition:

*Berlin is without a doubt the best city in Europe for **urbexers** – so much history, and so many amazing abandoned spots that are easy to get to on public transport (Dutton, 2018).*

*Speaking of scrumptious snacks, it would be considered sacrilege to come to Philadelphia and not sample a Philly **Cheesesteak**. What is a cheesesteak you ask? It's essentially a sandwich filled with beefsteak and melted cheese in a long hoagie roll, but trust me it is so much more than just a sandwich; in Philly it's a way of life (Cuthbert, 2018).*

By bringing learners' attention to these specific ways of compact meaning presentation professors raise students' awareness of the trends in English word-formation.

Introduction of Cultural Information

In modern interconnected world the professional competence of experts from various fields is increasingly connected to intercultural competence and professors need to take this fact into account when they are training their students – future employees. Kommers insists that the evolution of ICTs in the system of higher education presupposes strong focus on multi-culturality, thus the educators need

to be aware of “current large-scale societal challenges at the global level: restructuring economies, large scale migrations and the growing need for multicultural understanding” (Kommers, 2016, p. 14).

The very concept of intercultural competence is defined as knowledge based on people’s own cultural competence within the realm of foreign cultural conventions and standards based on traditional cultural institutions, norms, and values. Intercultural competence is primarily grounded in positive attitude to the coexistence in a society with various ethnic groups. Both people and society can develop such an attitude based on the policy of voluntary adaptation of a state’s social and political institutions to the needs of different cultural groups. Cultural standards are intertwined with instances of verbal behaviour. Since mastering a foreign language is not always enough for communicative success learners need to be fluent in three interconnected codes: linguistic, para-verbal, and cultural one (Selivanova, 2011, p. 275). This observation is very much in tune with that from an American businessman: “It is possible to master a foreign language. It is culture that one stumbles over” (Fixman, 1989).

The inability to coexist with others in multicultural environment coupled with insufficient motivation to mirror and accept their values is very likely to bring about the cultural shock. The said shock results from awareness that one’s basic assumptions about life and familiar ways of behaving are no longer appropriate or functional (Jandt, 2010, p. 292). Intensified intercultural contacts along with today’s constant flow of migrants around the world have both prompted increased scholarly interest in the phenomenon of acculturation (Schwartz, Unger, & Zamboanga, 2010).

Observing cultural patterns and specific salience of concepts demands willingness to coexist, to welcome a different point of view and reflect on it. Presumably, elements of different cultural patterns represented in travel blogs trigger in students motivation to learn and deepen their knowledge on the subject, thus developing tolerance and opening up a dialogue.

Travel blogs can trigger these cognitive processes by directly mentioning culture-specific vocabulary (with explanation provided or not), formal vocabulary in order to prompt interest and respect for cultures, different from the English-speaking one:

*You can surf, parasail or jet ski here, or simply sunbathe and sample some of South Beach’s Latin cocktails – this sultry neighbourhood’s Hispanic heritage means that visitors are spoilt for choice when it comes to Cuban cuisine and drinks. Try **ropa vieja** (shredded beef in a rich tomato, pepper and spice sauce served with tortillas) and **yuca** (a garlicky root vegetable dish marinated in lime and olive oil) (The 5 finest beaches ...).*

Translation students can develop their general linguistic aptitude by looking into transliteration rules for languages other than their working pair. Besides, inclusions like this serve as a powerful impulse to find out more about the cultural patterns mentioned, since they refer to real-world items and are likely to belong to an attractive culture for a specific student.

The variety of point-of-views, differences in the ways cultures cover reality may be a beneficial insight for language learners. Names for the same real-world items might be chosen according to different salient criteria. In the following example an English-speaking author uses the term “Ferris wheel,” designating an amusement-park ride, where Ferris refers to the surname of the ride’s designer – a 19th-century American engineer named George Ferris. Interestingly, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Ukrainian cultures preferred other attributives when they had to name this new concept: *rueda de la fortuna* / *vuelta a mundo* (Spanish), *grande roue* (French), *roda gigante* (Portuguese). Interestingly, Russian and Ukrainian cultures have developed an informal term to denote this concept – *чортове колесо* (lit. ‘devil’s wheel’) which contains an emotional response of fear to technological advances coming from abroad:

The next stop should be Ole Smokey Moonshine, a corn-whiskey distillery located in Pigeon Forge’s The Island, a 23-acre entertainment area with a ferris wheel and ample other attractions. (Guide to Tennessee whiskey...)

Verbal creativity. The presence of puns is yet another distinguishing feature of most travel blogs, since they follow the same guideline of entertaining the reader, this time by challenging his or her cognitive aptitude and language level. It must be mentioned, however, that this specific feature of travel blogs requires of the reader at least the B2 level of English, since they presuppose quite large amount of vocabulary and verbal flexibility.

Wordplay can take place on a variety of linguistic levels. As an example of creative word formation one can give the name of a travel blog www.everywhere-ist.com, which is wittily stressing the extensive travel experience of the author. Students can wonder about the morphological differences between English and their native language, they can also try to reflect upon the frequency of similar instances of word formation, where an adverb is transformed into a noun.

Playful decomposition of idioms is a frequent form of wordplay. It can trigger intense cognitive processes in students, who have sufficient scope of idiomatic expressions in their repertoire. The wordplay in the following example is made possible due to mentioning concept of rice, which is a grain (*It’s a no brainer – It’s a no grainer*):

*Keen for a bit of local culture and some truly epic views? Then **it's a no grainer** to visit Tegallalang rice paddies. Go down around 5am just before the sun comes up, meet the locals, grab a coconut leaf hat and sip coconut water as you explore the phenomenal emerald-green fields (Griffiths, 2019).*

Paronymic attraction is another popular way to create engaging wordplay, leading students to intellectual pleasure of decoding the joke:

6 'Can't Miss' Things to Czech Out in Prague

A few hours away from most over-priced European cities, Prague is nestled in Bohemia, right in the center of the Czech Republic. Prague features a rich history, Gothic architecture, a castle, cobblestone streets, delicious food, and affordable prices

Playful attitude to the language and to the reader, challenging readers with wordplays are all instances of a bigger communicative trend – the one of entertaining and engaging the reader. In the following piece of blog writing it is done by means of irony, quite typical of modern youth. By using irony as a stylistic device the author intends to appeal to similar patterns of lifestyle in many readers – a positive outlook on life mixed with a bit of laziness and self-pity:

*It's usually possible to get by with just English and some imaginative sign language while travelling, but learning basic phrases in the local lingo will go a long way. ... **So all you have to do is become fluent in every language on the planet. Easy, right?** Well, it is if you've got the Hostelworld app on your phone. (Fun & Easy Ways...)*

Conclusions

In vibrant digital social environment travel blogs represent an abundant source of material for language learning. In English-language travel blogosphere we spot such prominent features as polysemantic vocabulary, compact meaning representation, specific strategies to present cultural information, and verbal creativity. These linguistic traits can obviously be observed in quite a few genres (soap operas, novels, news articles, private posts in social networking sites etc.) but it is travel blog that is potentially more attractive to younger language learners as it matches

the motivation of most of them – in the younger age most people are open to new experiences and are not so strongly bound by social responsibilities as later in life to be able to travel a lot.

Travel blogs could enrich teaching in ESL classrooms for students of all courses, intense linguistic courses, private tutoring, and undeniably – for students of philological courses. It should be noted, however, that travel blog can be used as a learning tool for B2-level students and above – those who have enough linguistic experience and flexibility.

From among the forms of student work with travel stories, it is recommended to compile individual textual collections, focused on polysemy, culture-specific concepts, wordplays, irony, creative instances of word-formation, and other similar instances of using language creatively.

Travel blogs may involve students in project group work, with the objective of sampling stories by country, by area or by activity and presenting one concise story to the classroom, as their own post or a paper brochure.

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Blog podróżniczy jako narzędzie dydaktyczne podczas lekcji języka angielskiego jako drugiego (nieojczystego)

Streszczenie

Obecny etap rozwoju technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych stwarza możliwość doskonalenia narzędzi dydaktycznych, umiejętności i badania efektów uczenia się. Artykuł omawia szerokie perspektywy edukacyjne, jakie daje wykorzystanie gatunku bloga podróżniczego podczas lekcji języka angielskiego jako drugiego (nieojczystego) (ESL). Autorki dokonują krótkiego przeglądu teoretycznego badań nad blogosferą podróżniczą i przedstawiają klasyfikację blogów podróżniczych według rodzaju komunikacji między nadawcą a odbiorcą. Na tym materiale tekstowym artykuł rozważa tak znaczące cechy blogów podróżniczych, jak słownictwo tematyczne, strategie prezentacji informacji kulturowych i językowa kreatywność, które mogą być interesujące dla uczniów realizujących poziom B2 lub wyższy. Autorki przedstawiają również kilka propozycji pracy indywidualnej uczniów z opowieściami podróżniczymi podczas lekcji. Proponowane formy pracy obejmują: ćwiczenia lingwistyczne (gry słowne, ironia, tworzenie słów), prezentację innej kultury za pomocą języka angielskiego, pracę projektową (dla zainteresowanych), napisanie własnego tekstu blogowego lub stworzenie broszury papierowej zawierającej relację podróżniczą z danego kraju.

Słowa kluczowe: blog podróżniczy, nauczanie języka angielskiego, bogata semantyka, kreatywność werbalna, realia kulturowe

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Блог о путешествиях как инструмент обучения ESL

А н н о т а ц и я

Текущая стадия развития ИКТ предполагает улучшение инструментов обучения, навыков и результатов обучения. В статье рассматриваются богатые образовательные перспективы блогов путешествий для студентов английского языка как второго (ESL). Авторы предлагают краткий теоретический обзор исследований образовательных возможностей туристической блогосферы, обсуждая классификацию блогов о путешествиях по типу связи между отправителем и получателем. На широком и современном текстовом материале в статье рассматриваются такие выдающиеся особенности повествования о путешествиях, как словарь широкой семантики, представление в компактном смысле, стратегии представления культурной информации и словесного творчества, которые могут представлять реальный интерес для студентов уровня B2 и выше. Читатель также может узнать о нескольких формах деятельности с рассказами о путешествиях, которые представляют собой индивидуальную специальную выборку с определенной направленностью (игра слов, ирония, творческие примеры построения слов), представление другой культуры с помощью английского языка, проектная работа для небольшого группа энтузиастов, выбирающая истории по странам, областям или по видам деятельности и представляющая один краткий рассказ классной комнате, в виде собственной публикации или бумажной брошюры.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: туристический блог, преподавание английского языка, широкая семантика, словесное творчество, культурная реальность

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Blog de viajes como herramienta de enseñanza de ESL

R e s u m e n

La etapa actual del desarrollo de las TIC sugiere la mejora de las herramientas de enseñanza, habilidades y resultados de aprendizaje. El documento analiza las ricas perspectivas educativas de los blogs de viajes para estudiantes de inglés como segundo idioma (ESL). Los autores sugieren una breve descripción teórica de la investigación sobre las oportunidades educativas de la blogosfera de viajes, discutiendo una clasificación de los blogs de viajes según el tipo de comunicación del remitente frente al receptor. En un material textual amplio y moderno, el documento considera características tan destacadas de la narración de viajes como vocabulario de semántica amplia, representación de significado compacta, estrategias para presentar información cultural y creatividad verbal que pueden ser de verdadero interés para estudiantes de nivel B2 y superior. El lector también puede aprender sobre algunas formas de actividad con historias de viaje que son muestras especiales individuales con un enfoque específico (juego de palabras, ironía, instancias creativas de construcción de palabras), presentación de otra cultura por medio del inglés, trabajo de proyecto

Travel Blog as an ESL Teaching Tool

para un pequeño grupo de entusiastas, que muestrea historias por país, por área o por actividad y presenta una historia concisa al aula, como su propia publicación o un folleto en papel.

P a l a b r a s c l a v e: blog de viajes, enseñanza del idioma inglés, semántica amplia, creatividad verbal, realidad cultural.