

**Blogging for State EFL Teachers:
‘Why’ and ‘How’ to Blog through the Greek School Network**

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Abstract

The challenge many teachers face is how to incorporate new technology into their classrooms that strengthens classroom learning by capitalizing on learners’ media literacies. Blogging can be used as a knowledge or language-centered instructional tool for state EFL teachers by engaging Ls in individual or collaborative activities and projects. In the hands of teachers and learners (Ls), ‘blogging’ offers a new and powerful toolkit for the support of both collaborative and individual learning by creating an amazing and friendly community for sharing ideas, participating in challenges and developing professionally as well.

Key-words: blog, blogging, posts, collaboration, autonomy, professional development, social activity, critical thinking

1. Introduction

‘Blogging’, a new and innovative technological tool, can be used in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms to support learning by relying on Ls’ interests and familiarity with online communication. ‘Blogging’ - a contraction of the term ‘web logging’ – has emerged in many educational contexts as a vehicle for integrating face-to-face and online modes of learning.

The main purpose of this article is to familiarize state EFL teachers with blogging practices by focusing on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ to blog through the Greek School Network. It discusses the potential of blogging to effectively support classroom learning and outlines the suitability of blogging for Foreign Language (FL) education. In particular, blogging is a ‘social activity’ which has the potential to be a transformational technology for FL teaching and learning at the Greek state schools by fostering EFL learners’ sense of autonomy, and perception of language awareness/ development in a pleasant, stimulating, collaborative and interactive way.

2. What is a blog?

A ‘blog’ is a website in which items are posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order. The term blog is a shortened form of weblog (or web log). Authoring a

blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called 'blogging'. Individual articles on a blog are called 'blog posts', 'posts' or 'entries'. A person who posts these entries is called a 'blogger'. A blog comprises text, hypertext, images, and links to other web pages and to video, audio and other files¹.

Blogs use a conversational style of documentation. The process of reading online, engaging a community, and reflecting it online is a process of bringing life into learning. As Richardson (2006) comments, "This [the blogging process] just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I don't see those things happening anywhere in traditional education". And he asks: "Could blogging be the needle that sews together what is now a lot of learning in isolation with no real connection among the disciplines? I mean ultimately, aren't we trying to teach our kids how to learn, and isn't that [what] blogging is all about?"

3. Why to blog?

3.1 Theoretical Review

What makes blogs so attractive, in both the educational community and the Internet at large, is their ease of use. A blog owner can edit or update a new entry without worrying about page formats or HTML syntax. Sebastian Fiedler, a media pedagogy specialist at the University of Augsburg in Germany, has been monitoring the rise of blogs for a number of years. "Many lightweight, cost-efficient systems and tools have emerged in the personal Webpublishing realm", he writes. According to Fiedler (2004), these tools offer a new and powerful toolkit towards supporting both collaborative and individual learning.

Blogs are emerging in many educational contexts as vehicles for personal expression and the dissemination and critique of Internet materials. Blogs are a flexible medium that can be used in approaches that provide educational participants with a 'middle space' of options as to how to integrate face-to-face and online modes. Blog construction encourages the development of individual, critical voices within the broader context of classroom interactions.

More specifically, in FL education blogging has been described as a social activity (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004), which puts the writer in a central position. It is argued that this centrality of the writer needs to be maintained in an educational context. The shift from teacher to learner orientation is seen as a significant change in language education. A blog informs and supports language learning environments which foster EFL learner

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

autonomy. Blog-based reflective writing increases Ls' sense of autonomy and it has a positive impact on EFL learners' perception of target language awareness and development.

In short, blogs have the potential, at least, to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide Ls with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers. The ability of both the teacher and Ls to easily update an online diary promotes blogging as a new form of communication to enhance class discussion and to create a community outside the classroom. Flatley (2005) argues that the technological medium provides a space where Ls can interact with one another, and it can open up the classroom space "where discussions are continued and where every learner gets an equal voice" (p. 77). In addition, blogs can promote collaboration (Flatley, 2005; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Oravec, 2002).

Therefore in a school context, blogs are sometimes used as "online diaries" where Ls write about their own experiences or share their ideas related to course topics. However, the power of a blog comes when others interact with an individual's posts, creating a forum for discussion and conversation.

Moreover, in contrast to more traditional forums for online discussion, blogs are open to the world to see. This provides visibility for Ls to share their ideas with the larger world. Glogoff (2003) notes that Ls used the [class] blog for a purpose other than from what it was initially intended, causing them to create a new blog for a more general audience. Huffaker (2005) argues that bloggers can get feedback on their writing from a wide range of other bloggers, and "they can link to fellow bloggers, creating an interwoven, dynamic organization".

Blogs not only motivate school Ls to participate more actively in their classroom, they also encourage them to write more thoughtfully (Flatley, 2005), with the quality of writing often surpassing writing in more conventional forms (Todras-Whitehall, 2005) by requiring Ls to "carefully formulate and stand by one's opinion" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 236). In addition, blogs encourage Ls to make their writing more concise (Beeson, 2005, p. 28). Oravec (2002) notes that blogging may further develop critical thinking skills because Ls must carefully evaluate what they read and write, as their words are now available to a larger audience.

3.2 Educational benefits of blogs

A teacher's blog is used as a personal library where Ls can find reference books, extra-curricular and leisure activities which cater for the group's special needs and interests. In this way, the blog may foster learner autonomy and encourage them to go further on their EFL studies, to practice their FL writing skills while expressing themselves; and to establish a

stronger affective bond with the teacher. A blog is also a space where Ls and parents find information about EFL course syllabus, homework assignments, assessment (Stanley, 2005).

Potential benefits as identified by learning specialists Fernette and Brock Eide and cited by Will Richardson (2006) in *Blogs, wikis, podcasts*, and other powerful webtools for classrooms include the following:

- Can promote critical and analytical thinking.
- Can promote creative, intuitive and associational thinking (creative and associational thinking in relation to blogs being used as brainstorming tool and also as a resource for interlinking, commenting on interlinked ideas).
- Potential for increased access and exposure to quality information.
- Combination of solitary and social interaction.

Within the structure of a blog, Ls can be motivated, demonstrate critical thinking, take creative risks, and make sophisticated use of the FL and design elements. In doing so, the Ls acquire creative, critical, communicative, and collaborative skills that may be useful to them in both scholarly and professional contexts.

3.3 Educational uses of blogs

3.3.1 The following are some possible uses of blogs in FL education:

- reflection on teaching experiences,
- categorised descriptions of resources and methodologies for teaching,
- ramblings regarding professional challenges and teaching tips for other colleagues,
- illustration of specific technology-related tips for other colleagues.

3.3.2 Within an organisational perspective a blog can support:

- a common online presence for unit-related information such as calendars, events, assignments and resources,
- an online area for Ls to post contact details and queries relating to assessment.

3.3.3 Within a pedagogical perspective a blog can support:

- comments based on literature readings and Ls' responses,
- a collaborative space for Ls to act as reviewers for course-related materials,
- an online gallery space for review of works, writings, etc. in progress, making use especially of the commenting feature,
- teachers encouraging reactions, reflections and ideas by commenting on their Ls' blogs,
- development of a learner e-portfolio of work.

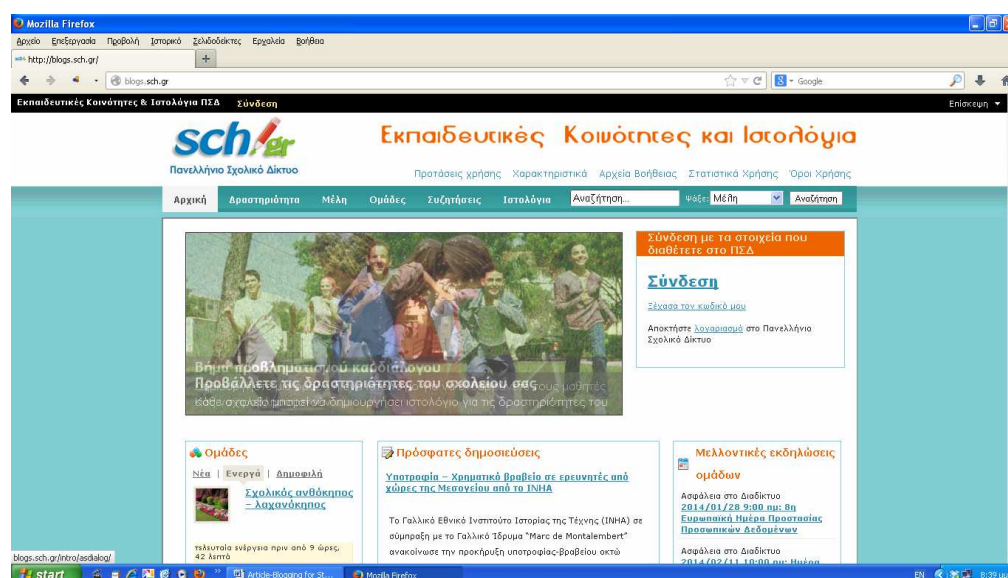
4. How to blog through the Greek School Network?

4.1 How to create a blog

First and foremost, you need to become a member of the Greek School Network in order to be able to use a *username* and a *password* which are necessary for creating your blog. In case, you have already been a Greek School Network member, just try to remember your username and password.

Steps for creating and managing a blog:

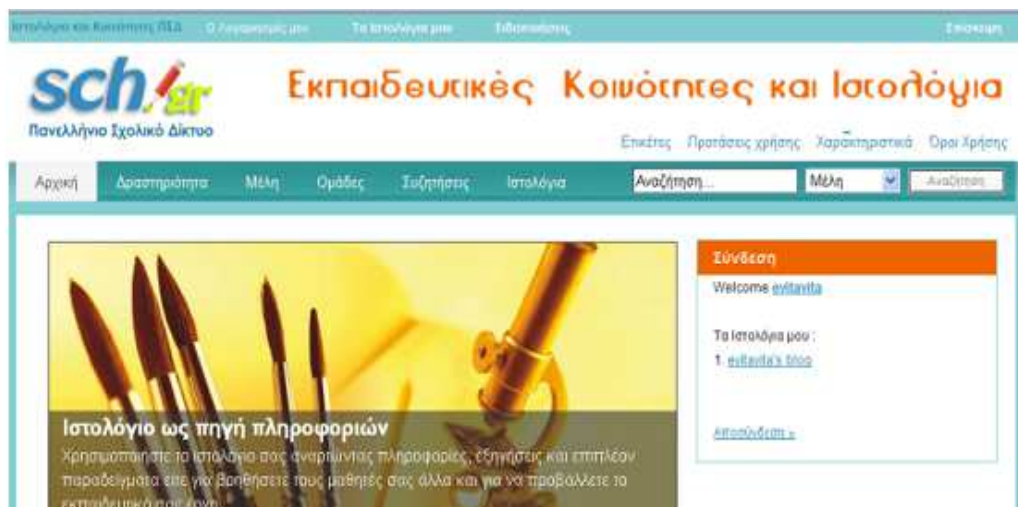
- Open through a web browser the website: <http://blogs.sch.gr>
- Then click on **Connection (Σύνδεση)** either on the top of the page or on **Connection (Σύνδεση)** on the right part of the page **μενού** by giving your personal info.



- That is, give your username and password as members of the Greek School Network and click on **Connection button (Σύνδεση)**.



- If your personal info is correct, your blog is automatically created under the URL: <http://blogs.sch.gr/onomaxristi> and its title appears: e.g. <http://blogs.sch.gr/evitavita>.



- To see your blog, press **Blog Name/My Blog** (όνομα ιστολογίου) e.g. **evitavita's blog** **OR**
- Write in your browser: **http://blogs.sch.gr/ονομαχρηστηστοΠΣΔ** (e.g. <http://blogs.sch.gr/evitavita>) in order to visit the first page of your blog.



4.2 Blog editing

At the initial page of your blog (see the above screen window) by clicking on:

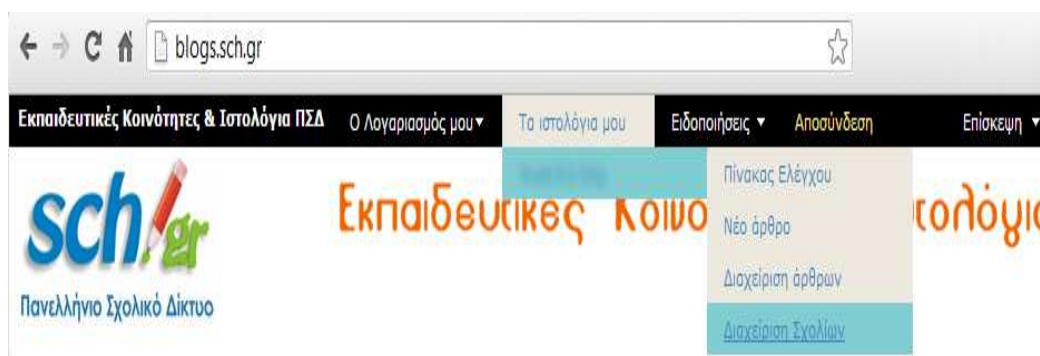
- **My account (Ο Λογαριασμός μου)**, you can change the settings of your account, edit your profile, see your messages, see your friends or new friend requests, your groups and new invitations.

- **My Blogs (Τα Ιστολόγια μου)**, you can go to the administering environment of your blog.
- **Notices (Ειδοποιήσεις)**, you can see pending requests for friendship, enrollment in groups, etc.

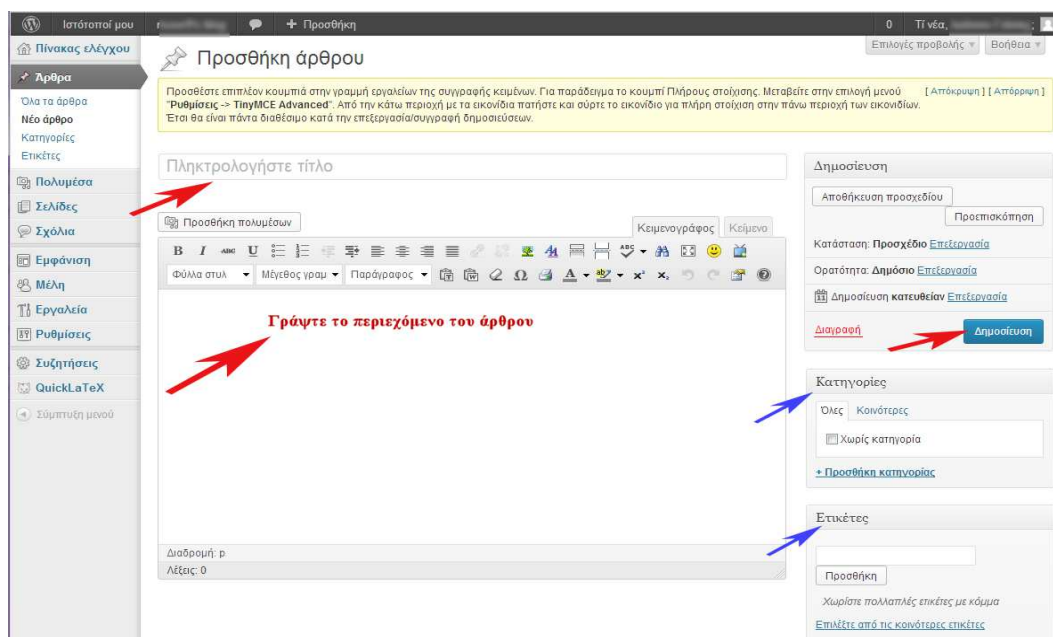
4.3 How to post an article

Create your own post by going over the horizontal menu:


- 1) From the **Control Board/Panel (Πίνακα Ελέγχου)** click on **New Article** button (**Νέο Άρθρο**).

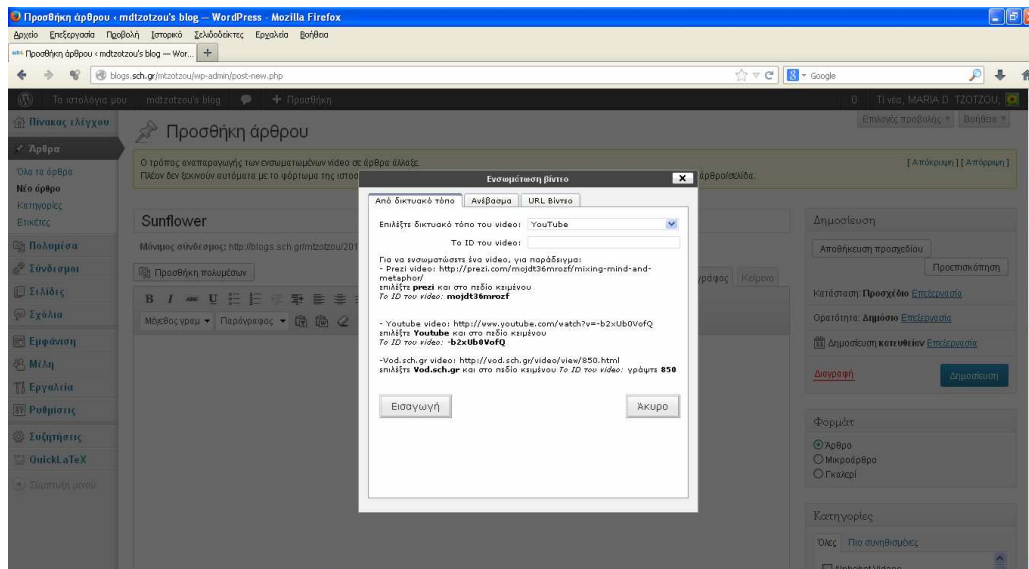


- 2) Write a title.
- 3) In the editor write the text of your article to be posted.
- 4) On the right column press the button **Post (Δημοσίευση)**.
(You can also press **Preview (Προεπισκόπηση)** before you Post)




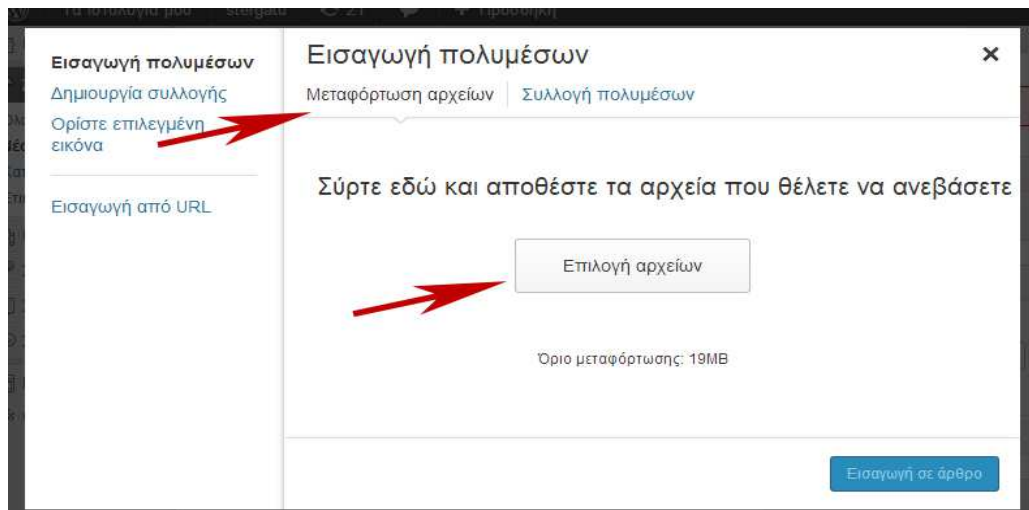
4.4 How to post a video

- 1) From the toolbar of the editor (κειμενογράφου) click on the last right icon 
 - 2) Select the **website** of the video, e.g. Youtube
 - 3) Write the **ID** of the video, e.g. -b2xUb0VofQ
 - 4) Then you press **Insert (Εισαγωγή)**.
 - 5) Finally, click on **Post (Δημοσίευση)**.
- (You can also press **Preview (Προεπισκόπηση)** before you Post)



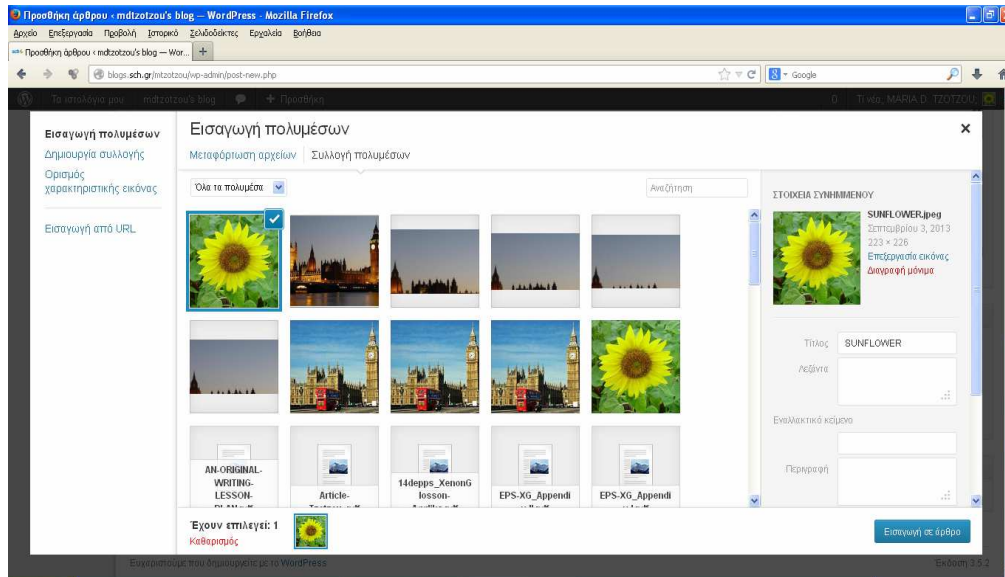
4.5 How to post a picture

- 1) Press the button 
- 2) Then, **Upload Files (Μεταφόρτωση Αρχείου)**.
- 3) **File Selection (Επιλογή Αρχείου)** from your computer.

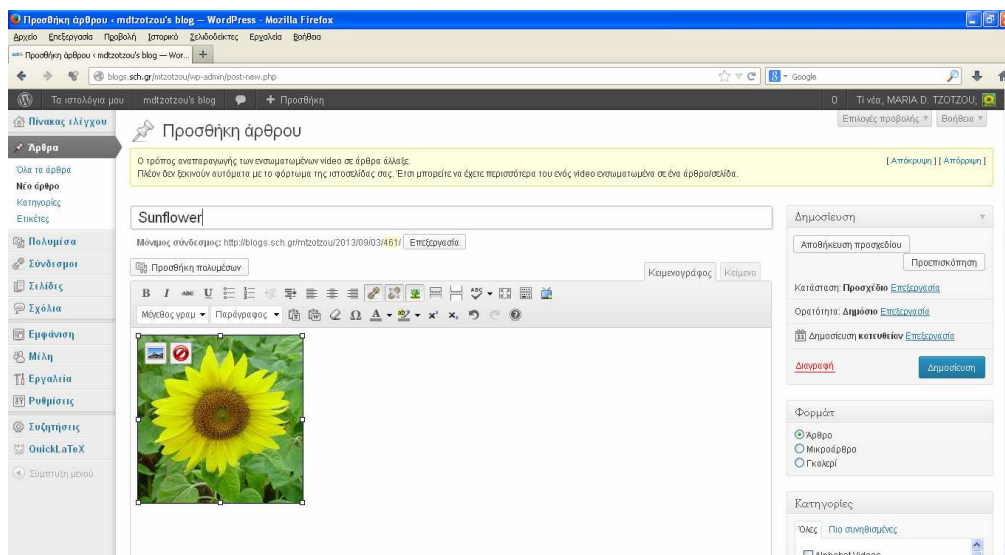


4) Press **Open** and the file starts uploading. After the uploading of the picture, the window of media collection (**Συλλογής Πολυμέσων**) will appear.

5) Press the button **Insert to Article** (**Εισαγωγή σε άρθρο**).



6) Return to the Editor and press **Post** (**Δημοσίευση**).

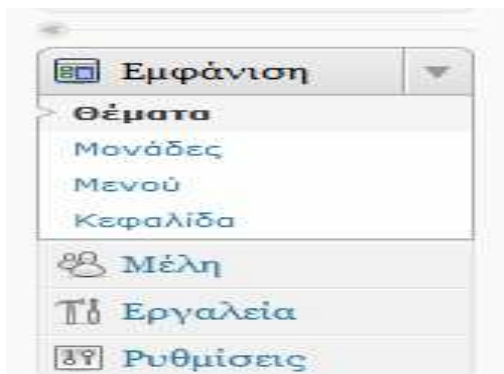


4.6 Blog appearance/theme

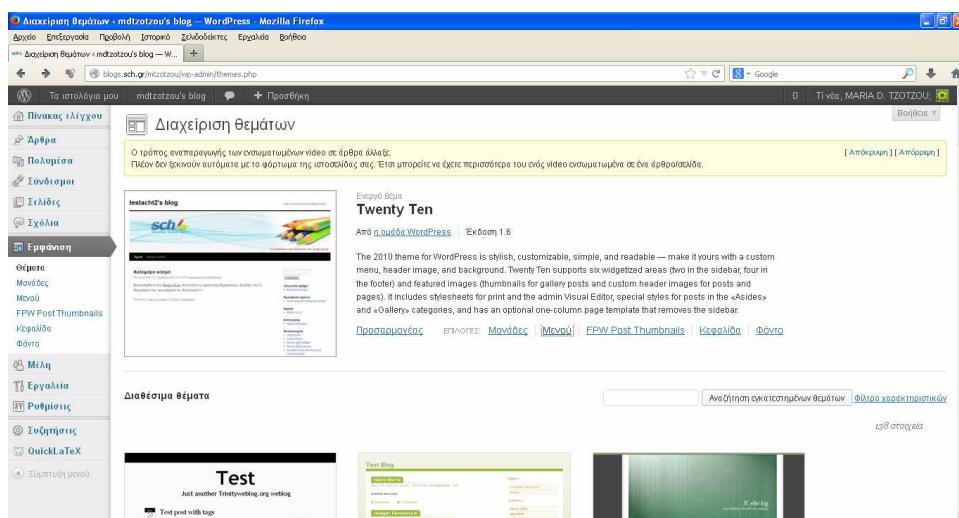
- Every newly created blog has a default appearance/theme such as the following:



- You can modify/change the appearance/theme of your blog if you press the button **Appearance**→**Themes** (**Εμφάνιση** → **Θέματα**) which leads to the page of **appearance/themes management** (σελίδα **Διαχείρισης Θεμάτων**).



- At this page you can press **Preview and/or Activation** (**Προεπισκόπηση και/ή Ενεργοποίηση**) of the theme you have selected.



What follows is an example of a blog with a modified or a new appearance/theme:



Some very useful links for more detailed guidelines on how to create and use blogs for educational purposes are the following:

- <http://blogs.sch.gr/manuals>
- <http://blogs.sch.gr/intro/>
- http://helpdesk.sch.gr/login_frame.php?category_id=5327

5. Conclusion

Blogging as a learner-centered instructional tool offers particularly useful opportunities for Ls' motivation, learner-centered feedback and dialogue. Such opportunities also support community-centered instruction by utilizing the critical social component of learning central to Vygotsky's (1978) notions of social cognition; Lipman's (1991) concept of a community of inquiry; and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) ideas of community practice. In other words, blogging expresses the importance of social and peer interaction as foci of the learning community. Hence, state EFL teachers can use blogs to motivate and encourage guided discovery and knowledge in the target language. More importantly, extending contact between EFL teachers and Ls through a topical edu-blog could provide a practical way to both mentor exceptional or enthusiastic Ls to continue their excellent FL progress and encourage weak or passive Ls to activate themselves in the FL classroom as much as possible.

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