Modern English blogs as a helpful tool to enhance students' reading skills

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the problem of using modern English text blogs for educational purposes to improve language skills of high school students. Being a special communicative genre within the framework of Internet discourse, a blog attracts modern high school students who spend much time communicating online, so it seems relevant to refer to the use of text blogs in English language teaching to enhance students' foreign language skills. The classroom research, aimed to be described in the article, has been conducted in order to identify how the use of the Internet blogs influences the development of students' reading skills in English. The methods used include context analysis of modern authentic Internet text blogs, observation, tests, experimental studying, etc. The results prove different educational possibilities of modern English text blogs. Various blog types, their educational functions and typical linguistic features of a blog, grammatical and lexical ones, are demonstrated in detail as well. It is stated that text blogs not only develop different reading skills and strategies, but also help students to extend their vocabulary and to prepare for exams in English. Students become participants of a real foreign language communication in a virtual communicative environment created with the help of blogs.

Key words: modern blogs, EFL classes, blog types, authentic materials, reading skills, high school students, reading exercises.

INTRODUCTION

The development of reading skills is one of the most important goals in teaching and learning English. Moreover, reading acts as one of the main communicative and cognitive activities of high school students. Thanks to reading students receive new information, enlarge their active and passive vocabulary, develop analytical skills and the critical thinking abilities. As a rule, high school students are attracted by reading fiction, media texts and texts which are professionally oriented. It is worth stressing that materials for reading should be actual, problematic, sometimes controversial in order to contribute to the critical thinking development. Besides, extensive and critical reading with the follow-up analysis and discussion of the main ideas become relevant in high school.

An important point is that a teacher faces the need to create an authentic language environment that helps students to master language norms and cultural peculiarities. The effective use of the Internet helps to create such language environment, which in turn helps to raise students' internal motivation in learning English and to use this language as a real means of communication. In fact, the Internet is a source of various authentic materials, necessary for the communicative competence development. In this paper blog will be considered as such authentic material for promoting language development.

The main goal of the paper is to find out the correlation between the systematic use of authentic text blogs with high school students and their level of reading skills development in English.

The following hypothesis is put forward according to the identified goal: the use of reading exercises based on authentic English blogs will contribute to the development of reading skills in teaching English to high school students.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyze the educational possibilities of a blog it is needed first to consider its definition, types and typical features. The definition given in most scientific papers points out that a blog (a web diary or an event log) is a website that contains regularly updated author's notes on a specific topic, represented by textual, graphical information and multimedia files. As for its main features, it could be highlighted that blog notes have a reverse chronological order. All of them are clearly dated, which makes it easy to track all the events on a blog. Moreover, one can observe the presence of feedback or an actively developing system of reader comments, which perform the role of responses to the author's publication (Goroshko, 2009).

The communicative environment of the online diary is based on a combination of two forms of speech: monologue and dialogue due to the ability to leave comments. It is worth noting that the monologue of a blog is associated with the presence of a thoughtful, coherently designed, logical author's publication created on the topic of a blog. In its turn, such blog feature as its dialogue character appears due to communicator-commentators who enter the discussion with the author of the online diary or with each other, following the author's theme.

So, we can conclude that the blog is a special communicative genre within the framework of Internet discourse with the help of which Internet users can express their ideas, views, opinion. Due to this fact the blog is endowed with social functions to meet the needs of a person in expressing oneself and in communication (Panyusheva, 2010). The interactive nature of the blog communication has contributed to the popularization of this Internet genre as a way of creative expression of one's personality.

G. M. Germasheva (2014) stresses that a blog is distinguished from other forms of the Internet communication by the simplicity of its search and publication, high social prestige, and the possibility of establishing direct communication among bloggers. Being a popular and widespread form of communication in a virtual environment, blogs perform a number of functions in relation to authors and readers of blogs. The functions are as follows:

- Communicative function appears in the unlimited ability to communicate in a virtual environment.

- Self-presentation function implies the possibility to express your ideas, views, to realize creativity with the help of blogs.

- Entertaining function – the Internet communication on topics of interest gives users pleasure and joy, moreover, it is a way of spending free time.

- Function of rallying and maintaining social ties – the blog communication with both strangers and friends helps to find common ideas, views, forms new points of contact in people's relations.

- Memoirs function – blogs work like traditional diaries where the author keeps important events of his life, reflects his own life experience;

- Reflective function and self-development function – bloggers analyse, select information for their blogs, besides, many of them talk about interesting places, phenomena, events, thereby performing educational activities.

- Psychotherapeutic function – people analyze their feelings and emotions while transmitting them into blogs, thereby helping themselves to understand their own personality (Blog and vlog, 2019).

Today there are many papers describing various types of blogs that have certain characteristics and have their own target audience. As a rule, the classification of blogs is based on lots of criteria. The types of blogs according to the three most important criteria are presented in the table below (Table 1) (Blogs in learning, 2019).

Table 1

The blog typology				
The criterion	The blog type	Key features		
The number of	Personal blog	Supported by one person - the blog author		
authors	Shared blog	Blogging is carried out by a group of people		
		according to certain rules established by them.		
	Corporate blog	It is supported by employees of a particular		
		organization, company, and is used to enhance the		

		image of the organization, as well as to rally a working team.	
The type of content	Fext blog	The content of the blog is mainly texts.	
	Photo blog	Photographs are of primary importance here. The can also have headings or captions.	
	Music blog	The main content is represented by music files.	
	Podcast or blogcasting	The content is presented by regularly updated audio recordings of lectures, talk shows, etc. There is an ability to download them to a computer.	
	Vlog	The main content is video files.	
The purpose of creation	Author's blog	Authors share their personal experience, views, beliefs aiming in finding like-minded people, attracting a specific target audience.	
	Thematic blog	The blog notes are related to a specific, narrow topic: politics, sports, medicine, music, travel, etc.	
		A blog with scientific or educational content	
	blog	created by educational institutions to inform the target audience about their activities.	
	Business blog	Serves to promote goods, services of a particular company, enterprise.	

Having analyzed different blogs, we can conclude that the mixed content blogs predominate at present. Nevertheless, for different purposes certain blog types are usually chosen. For example, special attention should be paid to text blogs for educational purposes, as they are a source of authentic materials for teaching reading in high school.

Moreover, it should be noted that blogs have certain advantages thanks to which they have a positive effect on the learning process while teaching reading. According to E.S. Polat (1998), the educational advantages of teaching aids are the natural, technical, technological qualities of an object used for teaching purposes in teaching. Applying this definition to blogs we can come up with the following educational advantages of them:

- openness - determined by the fact that all the Internet users can visit the blog page;

- *linearity* – typical for the blog author's notes which are arranged and changed chronologically, thereby allowing users to keep abreast of the latest news;

- *authorship and moderation* – the blog is managed directly by the authors;

- *multimedia features* – the usage of multimedia files of different formats in the blog content: texts, graphics, photos, videos, audio materials (Sysoyev, 2012).

Besides, blogs can play certain educational roles along with their advantages for teaching language skills. E.S. Polat (1998) focuses on the following roles:

1) organization of research and project work of students;

2) creation of an authentic language environment;

3) creation of self-education conditions;

4) activation of students' cognitive abilities;

5) motivating students to work independently;

6) encouraging students to use a foreign language as a means of communication.

All these advantages and educational possibilities mentioned in the scientific studies of the blog explain the relevance of working with authentic blog entries and their choice for our classroom research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials used in the classroom research are authentic modern text blogs, all mentioned in the reference list below. Students who participated in the experimental studies were offered to work with

authentic texts of English net blogs and to complete sets of exercises as additional materials at the EFL lessons in high school. Students were asked while doing exercises to pay special attention to language means (grammatical and lexical) typical for any authentic net blog, which surely has a positive effect on the students' language competence level.

The following *methods* have been used in the framework of classroom research:

1) theoretical: analysis of literature on methodology and linguistics on the topic of the research; analysis of the English coursebooks for grades 10-11; context analysis of text blogs; synthesis and generalization of basic research concepts;

2) practical: observation, tests, surveys, trialling within classroom research.

The classroom research should be described in detail to prove the hypothesis. It was carried out at the secondary school in Tula, Russia, in grade 10 A. 13 near intermediate-level high school students took part in it. It comprises 3 stages (diagnostic, formative, evaluation stages), each with its own objectives:

1) to determine the actual level of reading skills development in English of the 10-graders (the diagnostic stage);

2) to use the suggested set of reading exercises in the learning process (the formative stage);

3) to identify the final level of reading skills in English of the 10-graders (the evaluation stage).

Firstly, the students were given a test at the diagnostic stage to determine their initial level of reading skills development (Appendix A).

The test consists of three reading assignments based on the texts of English blogs. Moreover, the suggested assignments were designed in the format of the Unified State Exam in English. The test is aimed at revealing the initial level of reading skills development in skimming, scanning, intensive reading as well as students' ability to identify structural-semantic relationships in the text. According to the test results of 13 people, 3 people received "5", "4" - 6 people, "3" - 4 people, "2"- 0. There were the following criteria: it is possible to get 22 points in total for the test: 20-22 points - "5", 15-19 - "4", 12-14 - "3", 0-11 - "2". The results show an average level of reading skills development that is quite low for high school learners, but some improvement can be achieved.

At the formative stage of the research the exercises were based on 5 online texts of English blogs on the topics: education and career, healthy food, modern technologies, environmental problems, travelling. The exercises reflected 3 stages of text framework and developed different types of reading. Moreover, the communicative and creative tasks were suggested. Students carried out the exercises with interest, discovered new and interesting facts, and participated in all types of activities actively. The following set of exercises can serve as an example of work that was carried out with students.

The set of exercises is based on the blog "FANNEtastic food blog". The text chosen is "7 Common Nutrition Myths" (Figure 1) from the source: https://www.fannetasticfood.com/.



Figure 1. "7 Common Nutrition Myths" from https://www.fannetasticfood.com/

1) Look through the text quickly. Find 7 unknown words which can be key words to understand the text.

2) Work in groups of four. Compare your lists and point out the common words. Look at the blackboard. There are the key words for this text. Compare with your lists and highlight the same words on the blackboard. Match the words with the definitions given on the blackboard. Translate some of them into Russian.

3) Read the text again. Then, tell your partner what the text is about, using the key words in appropriate context.

4) Imagine that you are participants of the talk show "Healthy food: truth and myths". You are to choose one talk show host and one nutritionist who is a guest of this show. The other students are the audience. The host and the audience ask questions and the nutritionist answers (questions and answers are based on the text). (Key words with definitions were given to students in the worksheets).

The set of exercises based on the authentic text "7 Common Nutrition Myths" was an additional material for the topic "Food and health". These exercises were aimed at developing reading for gist. Besides, the exercises contributed to vocabulary extension on the topic. Moreover, speaking skills were improved, especially unprepared speech (an interview assignment). Pair and group work suggested in the set of exercises contributed to team building in the class.

RESULTS

Results of the classroom research were estimated at the evaluation stage which determined the impact of using English blog texts on the level of reading skills of high school students.

Students were asked to complete the same test as at the diagnostic stage (the diagnostic test results were unknown to them). According to the test results of 13 people, 6 people received mark "5", "4" - 6 people, "3" - 1 person, "2" - no one. So, we can conclude that the test results were higher, which indicates the positive impact of the exercises based on authentic blog materials on reading skills development. A comparative histogram is shown below (Figure 2).

These results of classroom research encourage us to consider and explain a great educational potential of modern text blogs for students' reading skills boost. It was found out that blogs are characterized by lexical and grammatical features of modern English that make authentic blogs highly relevant for improving reading skills.

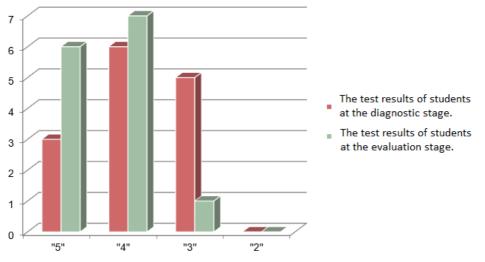


Figure 2. Reading test results

The fact is that the authors and readers of blogs use various lexical and grammatical means to attract users' attention, as well as to maintain contact and create a communicative environment. The results of the analysis of the main lexical and grammatical features of the Internet blogs are demonstrated on the example of the travelling blog "The poor traveler" (The poor traveler blog, 2021).

The typical grammatical features of the Internet text blogs include:

1) The use of exclamatory sentences that help to create a communicative environment in the blog in order to establish an emotional contact with readers: "But we'll be updating this post after the trip to add more tips based on first-hand experience so don't forget to check back soon!". "Because of its proximity to the Acropolis, it is dubbed the Village of the Gods. My curiosity is definitely piqued!";

2) The use of direct questions for involving readers in the communication process and creating an intra-blog dialogue. Thus, the author shows that they are not indifferent to readers' opinions: "Do you think we should finally try skydiving?". "Do you really need to go to these hard-to-reach countries soon soon? Can it wait? Maybe we need more time to prepare?";

3) An active inclusion of the imperative sentences in texts for urging readers to take some action. Such sentences are often used in headings: "Get a Certificate of Employment from your clients". "Open a bank account and save up!". "Beef up your travel history";

4) The use of ellipsis in order to express modality/evaluation of events: "Depends on what?". "Anything more than that can spell disaster for me." "Was, let's get that straight";

5) The use of nominative sentences (primarily in the notes headings): "Chill Hilltop Views". "Skydiving in Athens". "Greek Food Trip";

6) The inclusion of direct speech in the texts to express the emotional state and to involve readers into the events described by the author: "Then I thought, Holy eff, what am I doing here?". "This is my Narnia," I mumbled to myself, thinking that the many years I had spent in the closet finally paid off."

Thus, we have described the most frequent grammatical phenomena used in the texts of English blogs. However, it is worth noting that a lot of authors apply quite diversified grammatical tools when creating their notes, for instance, passive voice, conditional sentences, subjunctive mood, direct and indirect speech.

Having considered the *lexical features* of text blogs, we identified the following:

1) the active use of expressive and evaluative vocabulary to convey emotions, mood by verbal means: "I wasn't too thrilled to visit Venice in the beginning." "There was a time when Venice was the most powerful city in the world". "Several reasons are behind the staggering cost." "Ouch, my tummy shrieked";

2) the use of interjections for expressing the emotional state of the authors and readers of the blog: "True story! Haha". "Unfortunately, we might be too early for skiing because the resort opens December 15-ish (ugh!)". "Ouch, my tummy shrieked. My wallet said the exact same thing";

3) various abbreviations are also a typical feature of the Internet communication: "I'm lucky to be part of the TV industry in my past life (LOL)". "I will never forget that once in our life I was a 'jackass. 'LMAO!".

4) the use of informal vocabulary: "I will never forget that once in our life I was a 'jackass. "" "7 THINGS I WISH I KNEW when I was a Newbie". "Many of us won't give a damn if we miss a get-together with friends".

All these lexical features help to attract readers' attention and serve as a way of expressing emotions and feelings by linguistic means.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the blog features, we can conclude that a modern English blog is valuable linguistic material that can be used in the process of improving reading skills in high school because it contains a variety of modern linguistic features, actual topics and problems, especially relevant for high school students.

According to the results of classroom research, the use of authentic text blogs with exercises guiding students' reading is a helpful tool in teaching reading comprehension in high school, as text blogs can develop different reading skills and strategies, useful for final exams.

The practical value of the classroom research described lies in the fact that the analysis of the linguistic features of modern English blogs was conducted to get a better understanding of this genre, and the exercises on authentic text blogs could be used further in practice.

The prospects of the use of text blogs in high school include the analysis of modern blog possibilities to develop students' writing skills focusing on the imitation of the style of the blog as a special genre of written discourse.

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Appendix A

The diagnostic test based on the English blogs for 10-11 graders



Exercise 1. Match the headlines with the paragraphs. One headline is extra.

- 1. THE WHISPERING GALLERY
- 2. LONDON'S WEST END
- 3. GO FURTHER
- 4. PARIS'S OLDEST RESTAURANT
- 5. AFTERNOON TEA
- 6. TOUR DE MONTPARNASSE
- 7. NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL
- 8. BANK OF ENGLAND

From London to Paris – The Inexpensive Way

So, you're considering a trip to London and whether you want to head to the Olympics or have a touristy trip to see Buckingham Palace there are numerous ways to add a new twist. Whether you head to the Mad Hatter's for afternoon tea or jump on the Eurostar and take a nice trip to the city of love, the possibilities are wide and varied. We'll take you through a couple of activities you can enjoy in London

and then consider heading over the Channel to Paris for a beautiful addition to your trip. The beauty of this is that you can take in two capitals in one, relatively inexpensively as well.

A. Chicago may be closing in September but there are a number of other top performances to enjoy at the theatres here. Shakespeare's Globe continues to engage with Henry V, the Phoenix Theatre boasts Blood Brothers and the Shaftesbury has Rock of Ages continually selling out – widely believed to be better than the film brought out this year.

B. You've probably heard that the acoustics of some places are spectacular. For example, the Chichen Itza in Mexico was built in such a way that if you clap at the bottom the noise at the summit sounds like an eagle after reverberating around the inside. Well, you can go one better than that by whispering sweet nothings in your loved one's ear by standing at either side of this gallery found inside the dome at St Paul's Cathedral.

C. When you're spending a lot of time on your feet at Big Ben and Buckingham Palace, you need to know that there is a break coming. Booking somewhere to have afternoon tea is popular these days and consider these three:

- Tradition – Claridge's

- Fashionistas - Berkeley's Pret-a-Portea

- Value - Dean Street Townhouse

D. You might think that London is far enough, but when you can get to Paris for a day trip you'd be missing a trick not going. Not only is it the quickest and easiest but the cheapest way to get from London to Paris is on the train. You might feel that you've got enough trains to deal with in the English capital but why not go and take a look at the Eiffel Tower?

E. We know that you've clocked the River Seine and the Eiffel Tower already, but where should you eat? Well, off the beaten track, you can come across Le Procope which was opened back in 1686. This three-storey townhouse has been frequented by many, Benjamin Franklin to name one and now it offers classic dinner service. You need to book but it is one to get in your diary.

F. You would think that the top of the Eiffel Tower would give you the best view of Paris, but some mavericks believe that this is the place to go. You cannot even see the building itself from the 210-metre summit and the ninth biggest skyscraper in the whole European Union. Frequented by more and more people these days, the exterior isn't much to look at but from the inside you get to see a 360-degree vista.

G. Before you go back, take in arguably the most stunning piece of Gothic architecture in the world with this cathedral. Completed in the 14th century, some two centuries after it was conceived, this building was the heartbeat of Paris before it was immortalized by Victor Hugo with his tale of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame".

(You can get 8 points maximum)



Exercise 2. Fill in the blanks with suggested fragments of sentences. One fragment is extra. *My Braveheart Experience At The Highlands Of Scotland*

Ever since I was a wee kid, I was always a big fan of Mel Gibson's Braveheart, A_____ (which were actually kind of bad) or the acting (which was even worse) but because of the central message of freedom that the movie advocated.

When contemplating the Highlands of Scotland, it isn't hard to understand why William Wallace valued freedom above everything else: From snow-caped mountains **B**_____, the highlands of Scotland are the living embodiment of freedom.

Here's my Braveheart experiences in the Scottish Highlands. Are you ready to shout "freedom" with me?

The Highlands of Scotland refer

s to the region north of Stirling (considered as the gate of the Highlands but more on that later) which is known for its breath-taking nature and which serves for a nice contrast to the mostly plain lands C_____.

In times before our own, these lands were inhabited by different Clans (from the Gaelic word "clann" which means "progeny") ruled by different chiefs. If you have watched Pixar's Brave, you will probably be familiar with the way the clan system worked in the Highlands of Scotland.

Things in the Highland were relatively peaceful \mathbf{D}_{----} (the same guy who conquered Wales). The key to controlling the Highlands of Scotland was the city of Stirling since that was the neck that connected them from the rest of the island of Great Britain.

It was at the battle of Stirling Bridge (in the movie, said bridge was edited out since it was considered impractical. Hollywood, uh?) that William Wallace defeated the English and $E_{_}$, inspiring other Scots to join his fight for freedom.

Ever since, the region has suffered some highs and lows, including the Jacobite rebellion and the introduction of farming which changed the local economy $F_{__}$, the nature still remained. Today you can explore the breath-taking landscapes of the Highlands of Scotland at your own pace. The region is vastly large that it would probably take you weeks to explore every single landscape and climb every single mountain.

My favorite part of the Highlands? Glencoe (Gaelic for "weeping valley"), which is mostly known in modern times as the filming spot for James Bond's Skyfall. If it's good enough for James Bond, it's good enough for anyone.

"So how about Loch Ness, Raphael?" Well, the highland is home to many Lochs (Gaelic word for "Lakes"), of which Loch Ness is the most famous one without doubt. It is said that an ancient monster inhabits it and the loch is deep enough to remain unexplored, $G_{__}$. If you ask me, it's just a Marketing ploy to encourage people to visit it but hey who cares? Loch Ness (and frankly, all the lochs of the Highlands) are some of the most beautiful lakes that you'll ever see in your lifetime. What are you waiting for? Book those tickets and go to the Highlands right now!

1. to mighty lakes where ancient creatures roam

- 2. not because of the battle scenes
- 3. until the English invasion led by King Edward I
- 4. but no matter the changes that the people endured
- 5. located south of them (known as the Lowlands)
- 6. proved himself to be a fierce warrior
- 7. because there are some legends about it.

8. fueling myths and legends among locals and foreigners alike

(You can get 7 points maximum)

Exercise 3. Read the text and answer the questions. Choose only one variant 1, 2, 3, or 4. *6 Signs You've Survived a Trip to Scotland*

Scotland is one of those unique places that offers a great place to go on a walk. This beautiful countryside is home to beautiful, crumbling ruins, amazing geological phenomena. Spend a week here, and you're likely to go home with some larger-than-life stories.

Scotland is a treasure trove of hole-in-the-wall restaurants and favorite shopping areas. For everything from eccentric knickknacks to world-class fashion, stroll around Edinburgh or the Lothians. Hoof it down the world famous and historic Royal Mile, where shops line the streets and beautiful architecture towers over the hustle and bustle below. Sip wine in one of the fine restaurants in the area while you watch the sunset behind the spires lining the horizon. This beautiful country is home to some stunning national parks. If you're feeling a little stir crazy, take a drive out to Cairngorm National Park. Depending on the time of year you're visiting, there are a whole mess of things you can do out here. In the winter, Cairngorm Mountain is home to some of the finest powder in the country, attracting snowboarders and skiers alike to its smooth white slopes.

In the warmer months, do some hiking, or try your hand at the nearby archery range. Not too keen on traversing the countryside yourself? Nearby Alvie Stables offers guided trail rides and lessons to travelers.

There's a lot of what's called "wild swimming" in Scotland, which is swimming in natural bodies of water. This country's unique water features make it an amazing place to go for a dip. Check out the Fairy Pools, just west of Skye. These unique pools are full of crystal clear, blue water enclosed with rock walls. Though the water is cool, the waterfalls and general magic of the experience draw thousands of swimmers every year.

Scotland has more historical landmarks than you can shake your kilt at. With beautiful castles dotting open countryside and old architecture lining their city streets, you can hardly walk a mile without running into something beautiful and historically significant. Be sure to check out Stirling Castle. This amazing piece of history was constructed in the 12th century, and has seen countless bloody sieges and power struggles. The architecture and gardens are awe-inspiring, and the detail within the castle walls themselves is breathtaking.

A. Why is Scotland a good touristic destination?

1) It is the largest country in the world.

2) There are a lot of places worth visiting.

3) It is rich for festivals.

B. The word "knickknacks" (the second paragraph) refers to

1) small worthless objects, especially household ornaments.

2) expensive clothes.

3) places of interest.

C. Why does the author advise to visit Royal Mile?

1) It is an ancient castle.

2) It is a succession of streets with many shops and beautiful pieces of architecture.

3) It is a shopping mall.

D. What types of tourists does Cairngorm National Park engage?

- 1) food lovers.
- 2) painters.
- 3) skiers, hikers and snowboarders.

E. What does "wild swimming" mean?

- 1) rafting.
- 2) open water swimming.
- 3) swimming near waterfalls.

F. Fairy Pools are famous...

- 1) swimming pools.
- 2) lakes.
- 3) water parks.

G. What is "amazing piece of history" in paragraph 6?

- 1) the opera house.
- 2) the monument.
- 3) the castle.

(You can get 7 points maximum)

Answer keys for teachers

ŀ	Exercise 1	Exercise 2	Exercise 3
A	A-2, B-1, C-5, D-3, E-4, F-6,	A-2, B-1, C-5, D-3, E-6, F-4,	A-2, B-1, C-2, D-3, E-2, F-2,
(G-7.	G-8.	G-3.