

Introducing an EFL course website and blog to extend student engagement and learning

Grant Mitchell

Abstract

This article describes an EFL course website and blog for a Global Issues communicative English course for first year dentistry students at a university in Tokyo. The rationale for, and benefits of, establishing an online component are explained. An analysis of the students' comments on the blog, as well as the result of a student survey, is also explored. Finally, future extensions to the online component are discussed.

Key words : blended learning, communicative English, course website, global issues, student blog, student forum

Introduction

As with most language courses at Japanese universities, the time students allocate to learn and practice English is largely inadequate, and greater opportunities to practice output outside classroom time are necessary. Current ESL theories emphasize the overriding importance of providing opportunities to learn and practice in communicative and meaningful contexts (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Contributing carefully considered opinions to an online blog in full expectation that people will respond, provides such contexts. This article describes a course website and corresponding student blog that was established in the 2010 academic year to enhance a Global Issues communicative English course for first year students at the School of Dentistry, Nihon University, Tokyo. The rationale for establishing an online component will be explained and the benefits for such an innovation will be argued. Over the first semester, the students' comments on the blog, as well as the results of a student survey about the online components of the course, were recorded and analyzed, and these results will also be discussed. Finally, future extensions to the online component will be explored in detail.

Background

The course is one of two compulsory English curricula set for 130 first year students, split into 4 classes of mixed levels. Students attend two 50-minute classes, back to back, each week. The approach to this communicative and collaborative 8-cycle course is designed to give equal

weight to all language skills. Each segment of a cycle emphasizes a single skill while each activity within that segment allows the student to incorporate practice of all language skills. The course designers believe that this approach is beneficial in preparing students for the ESP courses they will take in future years, and helping them develop the communication skills they will need attending conferences, in reading and publishing research or attending graduate study overseas (Chretien & Mitchell 2009). The goal is to encourage the development of well-rounded students who can communicate adequately in English, not only in Japan, but worldwide, and creating future graduates who can participate in the international dental community. A full description of the structure and the philosophy behind the activities and themes of this course can be found in Chretien & Mitchell (2009).

This is the second year of the course but the first year of using a course website and student blog. The website is hosted by Apple Inc.'s Mobile Me service, and has been constructed and administered by the author using Apple's iWeb software. The site is password protected to maintain privacy and security. Cycle booklets, edited articles for further reading, instructions for homework and extended activities are uploaded to the website by the course coordinators each cycle. Students can read and/or download and print any items, and can add comments about the topic on the blog for each cycle, according to instructions.

For each cycle, students were generally required to go the website, read a short introduction to the topic, follow any instructions for activities and download to read a short article. Every article is carefully chosen to provide various sides to a contentious issue as a springboard into further student led discussion. For one topic we invited two 'special native speaker guests' to voice their opinions on the blog to increase authenticity. However, care needs to be taken tapping into the wealth of authentic, but unedited, information available on the internet (Hess 2001). For this course, all text is heavily edited beforehand to place it at just above what the median level student in the course would find challenging, but where the higher-level students could still learn some new vocabulary and expressions. Additionally, ideas for successful study that were brainstormed and discussed by the students during the course orientation were posted on the website for students to return to if they needed to refocus on their goals.

Rational for an online component

Online discussion spaces are increasingly being used to provide a more natural language learning environment by facilitating authentic interactions and discourse communities (Zha, *et al* 2006). Furthermore, teachers gain more control by creating learning environments targeting their specific local needs, either their syllabus or their students, without having to rely on structured textbooks (Hess 2001).

Research has long shown the benefits of incorporating an online component into language study (Owston 1997, Phillips 1998) and effective online components have been successfully developed in some Japanese university courses (e.g. Miyazoe & Anderson 2010, MacKenzie, *et al* 2010). Encouraging students to express themselves in an online peer forum context complements goals of building confidence to engage with others in their L2. Bower, *et al* (2009) show how web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, provide opportunities for constructionist and co-constructive learning, and they outline helpful suggestions where these technologies can assist the transmission of knowledge, within the various knowledge dimensions. But in short, the process can be summarized thus: any text posted on the website by the course coordinators provides a transmissive pedagogy while the interactive blog component assists in dialogic, constructionist and co-constructive learning (Bower, *et al* 2009).

Essentially, what we are creating with this syllabus is a ‘blended learning’ environment (Garrison & Vaughan 2008) where a traditional classroom component is mixed with online learning systems of some kind. It is important to note neither dominates at the other’s expense. They should be coherent, and operate in tandem. An online component of a course should not just exist for its own sake. And it is important to remember the role of the teacher and classroom still remains fundamental to language learning, and it is a mistake to consider the online components and the teacher/classroom to be in opposition to each other (Knowles 2002). Instead, they should be thought of as the perfect complement. In this kind of curriculum, technology is only a mediator for student collaboration and representation. It is the *type* of tasks and thinking processes in which students engage that continues to determine the quality of learning (Bower, *et al* 2009).

Furthermore, research has found that students are open to quality online learning programs if it complements face-to-face teaching, and does not substitute it (Felix 2002, Hess 2006). Computer-mediated communication via the internet has been found to lead to more participation, enjoyment, an improvement in attitudes toward target language and an increased quality of writing, as well as encouraging a sense of community as written work is shared in a ‘public’ forum (Ware 2004). Contributing to an online blog is practicing regular written expression, but with an additional value: the authenticity of the posted message for their learning community, their teacher and the outside world (Mompean 2010). But online learning will only be useful to students if it provides relevant information and activities quickly and efficiently and also if these are ‘convincing and demonstrably linked’ to learning goals (Hess 2001, p41).

Additionally, the non-inhibiting mediation of the internet decreases student anxiety about negative appraisals (Blake & Zyzik 2003). Students feel the online world is a safe environment to experiment with language and perhaps make mistakes (Felix 2002). It is a haven for shy and/

or less motivated learners to interact (Warshauer, 1996). They also have more time to review and edit their conversations, and time to reflect on the structures peers are using (Lee, 2002). But most learning activities should avoid being individual and isolated exercises, and mostly be a part of a group activity with a goal that should be co-operatively reached (Hess 2006).

Blog contributions

Contributions to the blog were not compulsory, but students were advised that the more they wrote, the more points they could earn for their final evaluation. Exactly how much more was deliberately kept vague as the coordinators wanted to rely on the intrinsic motivation of the enjoyment in engaging with the target language in a process-orientated, non-competitive learning environment. The focus on contributions as a way to practice and gain confidence in English was consistently re-enforced. Students were asked for their opinions on the issues raised in the readings and why they felt that way. Over the period of the first semester (Cycles 1 to 4) contributions were quantitatively recorded and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : Data of student blog entries during four cycles of the first semester

Cycle	Total number of entries	Total Words	Average word length of entries	Longest entry	Entries over 50 words
1	90	2963	33	92	11
2	87	3639	42	151	23
3	99	7739	78	211	61
4	38	3139	83	150	31

The total amount of single student entries for each cycle was consistent at about 70-80% of the class body the exception being the 4th cycle for which the instructions to contribute were not sufficiently communicated to 2 of the 4 classes during the final week before the summer holidays. Consequently contributions dropped to 30% for that cycle, however the coordinators believe the overall trend will continue up during the second semester. More interesting are the gradual increases in total words contributed during those first 3 cycles: 23% and 112% increases on the previous weeks' contributions. Remarkably, even taking into account the poor number of entries for cycle 4, the average entry length has increased 150% from 33 to 83 words over the semester. Again, the number of students making entries of adequate length (at least 50 words) have increased dramatically from 11 (Cycle 1) to 61 (Cycle 3), with +150-word contributions not uncommon. Clearly these figures show that, during the semester, students have been gaining in interest, confidence and motivation with their expression of opinions on the blog.

Unfortunately, there are some limitations to the conclusions we can draw from these figures. Firstly, they only cover one semester of four cycles therefore trends are indicative at best. Secondly, it could be argued there is some bias in the figures that needs to be taken into account. In Cycle 3 students were encouraged to write a lot however it also attracted the highest number of entries, perhaps reflecting a greater inherent interest in that topic and activity. Furthermore, Cycle 4 figures are affected by the communication issues coinciding with end of semester, which saw the figures fall across the board. Finally, although it would be more illuminating, a more comprehensive, qualitative analysis of the writing remains to be undertaken.

Student survey

At the end of the first term, a student survey was taken to measure the effectiveness of using a website and class blog with this course, with 123 responses received. The following questions were asked, with students to circle the answers that most closely reflected their feelings :

1. Have you ever commented in English online, before this course?
(never/once/a few times/often/many times)
2. Do you feel more confident commenting online in English after this course?
no/yes, a little confident/yes, confident/yes, very confident
3. Does the website make this course more enjoyable?
no/yes, a little enjoyable/yes, enjoyable/yes, very enjoyable
4. Did you have any major problems using the website?
yes/no
5. If you had problems using the website, please tell me why :
 - I didn't have computer or printer access
 - I didn't have internet access
 - I couldn't make a comment from my computer—I got an error message
 - I didn't know how to use a computer
 - I didn't understand how to use the website, download a file, or make a comment
 - other problems :

The results were recorded and are shown in Table 2.

The results show that 91% of respondents feel that they gained in confidence in using English online and that for 94% of respondents, the use of a website and blog increased their enjoyment of studying English. More important are the results for students with limited experience of using English online before (those students categorized as having answered 'never', 'once' or 'a few times' to questions 2 or 3). Analysis of their responses showed 86% of this group feel an increase in confidence in commenting online, and 89% feel an increase in enjoyment with the course because of the online component.

Table 2 : Data of student survey responses to four questions

	never	once	few	often	many	Total
Q1	32	8	26	29	28	123
	no	little	yes	very		Total
Q2	32	8	26	29		123
	no	little	yes	very		Total
Q3	7	44	59	13		123
	yes	no				Total
Q4	59	64				123
	no PC/print	no internet	unable to make comment	cant use PC	didn't understand	other
Q4 (reasons)	11	11	42	3	1	5

N.B. Some students claimed multiple reasons

Challenges

Without a doubt, the biggest challenge to establishing the online component for the course was familiarity with navigating the online world, and some students' lack of access to computers, printers or internet facilities (see Table 2, Q4). Surprisingly, some university students in Japan, even within one the nation's most competitive tertiary education programs, seem to have very little experience using the internet or computers. While most of the obstacles were overcome during the semester through mini-training sessions, workarounds or alternative arrangements (e.g. writing out 'blog' comments by hand), there still remain some students who, for one reason or another, cannot fully take part in the online component.

Additionally, there are compatibility issues with the website and some older versions of operating systems and/or internet browsers some students are using. In most cases, these older systems won't allow students to add comments to the blog and in rare cases they are unable to download documents we have prepared. Until students update their systems or find a way to access more modern systems for their studies, unfortunately these problems will persist.

Ware (2004) has found that the quality of online writing is sometimes less than word-processed texts, and this is also evident in our course as well. While pleased with the improvement over the semester, we had hoped that more students had taken the opportunity to express themselves more fully. A thorough discussion of the overall student writing in this course can

be found in Chretien (2010) in this issue.

Finally, the time and cost involved in establishing the website, monitoring and evaluating the blog entries and providing student feedback has been significant. In future, sufficient administrative recognition or support with adequate resources for the satisfactory completion of these tasks will be required for anyone contemplating similar innovations in their curriculum.

Future extensions

With this course, we are trying to create an environment where students are encouraged to engage in greater intercultural encounters. Up until now, students have been just scratching the surface of what this online component can offer. Students have rarely posted more than one comment, and have rarely responded to comments. The important authentic interactive aspect remains, but for now its just beyond their reach. However the coordinators intended the first semester to be an introduction to the online component and a chance to iron out any technical issues, before encouraging a second stage of greater interaction in the second semester.

For this environment to be truly interactive, students need to apply sustained and focused interaction through an authentic ‘forum’ of multiple turns, instead of only single blog comments. The move to this second stage will lead to an extension of interaction which will require greater instances of negotiated meaning to occur, mostly through repair moves such as clarification requests and comprehension checks (Ellis 1994). As the participants engage with each other, opportunities to clarify ideas, elaborate on them, evaluate existing knowledge for accuracy and then reorganize present themselves (Dekhinet 2008). When learners are involved in peer discussions in forums, this interaction helps them acquire new strategies and strengthen their own ideas through peer dialogue. Also they are able to correct lexical mistakes by comparing differences in use (Zha, *et al* 2006). The asynchronous writing in a forum allows more composing time, leading to improved syntactic performance. In addition, the database of writing can be drawn upon in the classroom to facilitate metacognitive reflection on their writing (Ware 2004). Moreover, forum responses are an extension of the forms of peer feedback explored in the blog that push students to write balanced comments with an awareness of the audience’s needs. It is hoped that time will be found for face-to-face class discussion to clarify comments in question as a way to maximize the effect of online peer feedback (Guardado & Shi 2007).

The online component of this course also requires greater authentic native speaker voices. Already NS guests have been invited to comment, but plans are being made to incorporate podcasts of short interviews with other native speakers on selected topics, either in lieu of text or as a complement. Ideally if the forum is open to native speakers, it has the potential for language and culture to be even more tightly intertwined, as the learners will be informants of

their own culture, as well as learners of others (Liaw 2007). Forum interactions are opportunities to allow students to participate in a cultural practice with (and on the same terms as) native speakers (Hanna & de Nooy 2003). Yet it should be remembered that successful participation in a forum depends on awareness of cultures and writing genres and an ability to work within them. After all, participation is not only linguistic training, but also cultural engagement (Hanna & de Nooy 2003). The next logical step would be to encourage students to begin contributing to outside open forums, particularly for higher year students who have the skill and confidence to engage in such autonomous practice.

The students' interactions online will continue to be monitored during the second semester and be analyzed along with student surveys at the end of the academic year. It is hoped that this will reveal more conclusive trends and results as to the effectiveness of including online components in a curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper has described a course website and corresponding student blog for a Global Issues communicative English course. The rationale for establishing this online component and the benefits for such an innovation has been explained. Analysis of the students' comments on the blog, as well as a student survey clearly indicate improvement in learner confidence and output, and increased motivation to study and practice. It is hoped that future extensions to the online component will ensure this trend continues.

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