Incorporating Blogs and Discussion Forums for the Benefit of Language Learning:

Improving My Methods

Vicki Schrader

University of British Columbia

ETEC 532

July 23, 2010

Teaching environments are changing, and so we teachers should too. Our students have been identified and labeled; we are far past the X generation or the Y generation and need to recognize that the Net-generation, or N-gens (Tapscott, 2004) have been so called with good reason. They are fully wired. They neither know nor relate to a world without digitization or an Internet connection, except for the media their teachers present to them in the archaic world of education.

This is an oxymoron. Education should be forward thinking, not living in the past. We educators should be preparing our students for their futures. Even History is purposed to inform future decisions. So why do so many of us continue to use and call for out-dated forms of media? We riso paper copies and write on whiteboards that need manual erasing with expensive felts that quickly run out of ink. We expect our students to write and submit essays on paper. The last time I allowed myself to submit a hand-written essay was in the fall of 1990 – my first semester of college twenty years ago. It is time to update our teaching environments.

The Target Environment

Mine is an ELL (English Language Learners) department where currently we are very traditional: whiteboard (not interactive), overhead projector (the kind that needs transparencies), risographed handouts, et cetera. Many of our ELL students are anxious to expedite their language learning via summer school or our district's online school; they take English 10, 11 or 12 when they are new beginners, usually failing miserably or getting bumped through leaving their next teacher wondering how they got there. They struggle with English, but they are digitally literate and fluent in social media.

As Wesch (2007) suggests, our language learners' struggles with English may be exasperated by our choice of teaching tools and a sense of irrelevancy. Though teachers may themselves be frustrated by trying to stay current amidst technology's rapid changes and being unaccustomed to incorporating technology into their lessons, it is time for us to bring together students' aptitude for the digitized and their frustrations with language learning, blending that with which they are entirely comfortable with that which is foreign and frustrating. Failure on our part to choose current and relevant technologies risks relegating our educational environment to below optimum standards.

Rationale for Target Environment Manipulation – or "Digipulation"

Language learning classrooms are perfect entities for creating blended programs where online learning enhances or extends the traditional classroom, prompting greater interactive opportunities for students to read and write, *and* speak and listen. The focus of a blended program would be to prompt communication between students, facilitated and monitored by the teacher in a way that the students would not feel was intimidating, but rather encouraging, providing accountability and guidance. Increased participatory communication in the target language, in this case English, enhances students' rate of acquisition, so if online learning can be used to increase communication in English and so also proficiency in English, without detrimental pressure on a teacher's preparation and marking time, it can – and should - be used to achieve both teachers' and students' goals.

The Internet, particularly with respect to the interactive web 2.0 applications, is a new genre of literacy (Alexander, 2006). While not entirely foreign, the style of text and its intricacies deserve due attention to ensure students' reading comprehension of online text is no

more challenging than paper-based text. Real-world experiences are highly likely to demand their attention to and comprehension of this literary form, so its incorporation within the classroom is highly relevant and required, not to be overlooked. By combining these objectives and activities through blogging, writing-focused objectives can also be addressed, enhancing learning exponentially.

Blogging, beneficial to a composition's content and organization (Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl, 2010), presents itself in an accessible forum for timely teacher and peer feedback (Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl, 2010), which are positive attributions for improving writing. Through student engagement in the evaluation and feedback process, students will also improve comprehension and critical thinking skills as they challenge themselves against a peer's composition. As these processes can take place outside the classroom, they have the potential to be structured so as to also provide an ELL student the benefit of time to process and compose.

Remaining mindful of the popularity of our students' resistance towards English and their propensity towards social web 2.0 media, I am enthused by positive student perceptions reported by Fisch (2007). Fisch's (2007) students' reflections on how their past year of blogging provided exciting opportunities to not be limited by class time, to continue the conversation, to see the opinions of their classmates, and to probe further into the issues will hopefully translate into our students' heightened desire to engage and so develop fluency.

Given common timidities of the language learner, live, or "fishbowl," blogging that happens synchronously within the confines of class can enhance a sense of security, allow contribution to the discussion via posting when the student is ready and providing a visual of

what others "say," while creating a written archive of the discussion (Fisch, 2007). While this may create moments of chaos and has the potential to overwhelm when multiple students post at once, it also creates pressure to post, to interact and use the target language as there is no longer the excuse of not being chosen to speak or running out of class time. Any impediment against speaking or writing we can remove for the student is one step closer to fluency through usage.

This written archive is also beneficial to the teacher. Immediate feedback in the fluidity of the traditional classroom can be intrusive, and so often simply does not happen. With these digitized conversations, a teacher can review and comment at any time, guiding and directing students as necessary. This can also be true of audioblogs – blogging via speech – in relation to aural and oral language (Hsu, Wang, and Comac, 2008): a teacher can review a student's speech and provide pronunciation guidance as necessary. In each of these cases, the student also has the record to refer back to in order to appropriately situate and apply the feedback. The student may well identify the same in the absence of teacher feedback or with the guidance of peer-driven feedback simply through interaction with the comfortable online environment echoic of social media.

In addition to blogs, discussion forums (DFs) have not only shown themselves to be beneficial to writing (Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell, 2007), but they are also reflective of oral language and, with proper prior instruction, can positively influence modal verb usage (Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell, 2007). To this extent, DFs may be an appropriate bridge to scaffold quieter, less confident and highly grammar-conscious students into speech. Students can practice conversational language in writing online, creating the narrative in their minds in the

absence of a physical audience. Thus, when the audience is later physically present, the quiet

student may feel conversation in the target language is less foreign and intimidating.

Currently

In my context, we have been looking to effect change over the last few years,

contemplating costly more appropriate, content loaded or updated textbooks that might just

provide the key to expedited language acquisition. We have implemented intake meetings to set

new students and parents off on the right foot, setting the tone for successful learning in their

new-found-but-yet-unfamiliar Canadian school culture. We have established a parents' night

and a social club to inform and connect families of different languages, hoping the common

language of English will be embraced and influence learning from the home angle. We

encourage, nag and lecture students, cheering them through oral presentations and burdening

them with grammar homework. The technology that is visible is discouraged: students text

under the table or fall back on electronic translators for their translation and other applications,

like video games for mental distraction. Once in a rare while, newer technology, such as a

YouTube video, is used in lessons or presentations; otherwise, we seem to have limited ourselves

to teacher emails and Microsoft Word for lesson planning and resource development. Our

intentions are based on sound pedagogy, but we are still missing two focal elements: a certain

kind of perceived relevance and an intrinsic desire to participate.

The two go hand in hand. If we can increase the relevance of the education, students

should become more intrinsically motivated to participate. In part, for the English, their parents

have determined it is relevant whether the student agrees or not. This is beyond our realm of

control. But how we teach it and how the students learn it is wholly within our control, and so

we are pedagogically responsible to seek effective means of language learning. Blogging and online discussion forums are showing themselves to be an answer to this call (Alexander, 2006; (Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Downes, 2004; Fisch, 2007; Montero, Watts, and Garcia-Carbonell, 2007; Wesch, 2007), relating to students in a form similar to the social media that already engages many of them and so feels intrinsically relevant. So then, if we can determine that online discussion forums and blogging are also effective in terms of both teacher and classroom time management, and in terms of increasing student involvement with the target language, producing desirable results in language acquisition, it seems only prudent to implement these tools into our methods.

Problems on the Horizon

Prior to full-fledged revolution, however, there are potential barriers of which we need to be both wary and respectful, though I do not see them as hindrances with longevity. Current administration is supportive of technological innovation and integration and some pioneers have already begun to implement wikis and online writing, with editing and submitting of essays done via time in the computer lab. My concerns lie remotely in the affluence of my students – I believe them to all have home access, but I do not know – and in both their and their parents' perceptions.

I am also wary of assumptions that not all N-geners are as digitally fluent as we believe them to be. Asking students to engage in online academia may not go smoothly without making clear distinctions between social and academic online communications.

With reference to audioblogging, I am currently of the opinion that this more complicated process does deserve attention (Hsu, Wang, and Comac, 2008), but it may be prohibitive in the

early stages of online integration into my department's teaching practices. I expect many students will find it exciting and engaging; some will struggle with it (Hsu, Wang, and Comac, 2008). With uncertainty that mere blogging will integrate smoothly and without impediment, I hesitate to accelerate audioblogs prior to successful implementation of simpler web 2.0 practices, mindful of audioblogging's potential to distract the class away from language and content objectives and teachers away from teaching. The learning curve of audioblogs may increase teacher work-load beyond manageable allotments (Hsu, Wang, and Comac, 2008).

The Road to Proficiency

With regards to affluence to the extent it permits internet accessibility at home, this is a requirement. While class time would be given over to the initialization of the blogging and eventually the synchronous discussion experience, enabled by either the mobile laptop cart or lab time in the computer room, keystone to my rationale is engaging students to continue the discussion beyond the classroom. Without home access, this is greatly hindered. A survey prior to launching the official lesson plan would answer this question and allow opportunity to explore options for students negatively affected by absence of home access. Provisions for these students may include allowing before and after school access to computers in the Learner Support Team (LST) room or the library. These students may also have solutions of their own; alternatively, I could approach administration for possible student support options such as a laptop loan for the duration of the course. Failing that, online requirements for so-affected students may need tempering according to their access.

Student perceptions (Hsu, H.-Y., Wang, S.-K., Comac, L. (2008) and parental perceptions will be interesting to follow. I suspect students will range from excited-and-anxious-to-engage to tentative-but-willing. Parents of our students tend to expect homework, which they may see online participation as eventually, but I suspect they at first will be apprehensive and suspicious of their child's time spent online. This is a valid concern. Hedging traditional views of and preferences for top-down teaching, the best approach will likely follow what has been best so far: diplomatic communication outlining rationale and benefits. In our multi-lingual environment, this can be more involved than one might otherwise expect, but with first reviewing the plan with our multi-cultural workers then employing their expertise and connections with the families, with print communication from us, the teachers, explaining technological requirements at home, expected time commitments, online behavior and security issues, parental cooperation is ultimately hoped for.

Regarding security issues, I and my teacher colleagues will need to select a learning platform for the discussion forum and blogs that will provide the security required by British Columbia law for minors. As examples, both Moodle and Wordpress can be configured to meet requirements. We will also need to ensure students are educated with regards to using discretion and being ethical and considerate in communicating in an academic forum. Critical evaluation and thinking often continues to be a struggle at the high school level, so as in the classroom these will be ongoing objectives for instruction, review, guidance and discussion. Parental observance will assist in this to the extent that parents monitor their children's online activity, but diligence on our part as teachers will be required. Many of our students are in homestay situations, often retreating to their rooms unsupervised. This is beyond our control, but ensuring homestay parents, guardians and custodians are included in preparatory communications will assist in

ensuring student privacy and security. Par for the course includes ongoing communication as requested by parents or as dictated by student activity.

Conclusion

Done right, with the literature duly considered and appropriately applied to this educational context, our commitment to incorporating blogging and online discussion forums into our plans should prove fruitful in terms of expediting language acquisition for our students. With evidence of solid progress in students' writing, both student and parental approval is expected to ensue.

References

Alexander, B. (2006). Web 2.0: A new wave of innovation for teaching and learning? *EDUCAUSE*

   Review, 41(2), 33-44.   Retrieved from http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0621.pdf

Arslan, R.Ş. and Şahin-Kızıl, A. (2010). How can the use of blog software facilitate the writing

   process of English language learners? *Computer Assisted Language Learning 23*(3), 183 –

   197. doi: 10.1080/09588221.2010.486575.

Downes, S. (2004).   Educational blogging. *EDUCAUSE Review, 5* (38).   Retrieved from

   http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0450.pdf

Fisch, K. (2007). Blogging: in their own words. *The Fischbowl*.   Retrieved from

   http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com/2007/06/blogging-in-their-own-words.html

Hsu, H.-Y., Wang, S.-K., Comac, L. (2008). Using audioblogs to assist English-language learning:

   an investigation into student perception. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 21*(2), 181-

   198. doi: 10.1080/09588220801943775. Retrieved from

   http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09588220801943775

Mabrito, M., Medley, R. (2008). Why Professor Johnny can't read: Understanding the Net

   generation's texts. *Innovate. 4*(6). Retrieved from

   hhttp://www.innovateonline.info/pdf/vol4_issue6/Why_Professor_Johnny_Can't_Read-

   __Understanding_the_Net_Generation's_Texts.pdf

Montero B., Watts F., Garcia-Carbonell A. (2007). Discussion forum interactions: Text and context.

    System, *35*(4), 566-582. doi:10.1016/j.system.2007.04.002

Tapscott, D. (2004). The net generation and the school. *Custom Course Materials ETEC 532*.

   (Reprinted from *Milken Family Foundation.)*

   http://www.mff.org/edtech/article.taf?_function=detail&Content_uid1=109.

Wesch, M. (2007). A vision of students today (and what teachers must do). Retrieved from

http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/10/a-vision-of-students-today-what-teachers-must-do/