MAKING THE MOST OF BLOGS FOR ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abtract

One way to foster relevant professional expertise is to involve students in authentic tasks which allow them to practice and be assessed on the application of real-life skills. This paper will develop on the force of the published word to empower students and enhance their English language learning. Instead of writing for the "in vitro" teacher and class environment, blogs are "in vivo" experiences where writing and life are intertwined and issues are exposed and dealt with in a transparent community of voices, entailing risks and trust, but most noteworthy, motivation, enthusiasm, teamwork and growth.

I. Introduction: What's in a Blog?

A blog is "a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and (usually) displayed in a reverse chronological order." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogging)

The current paper will develop on the force of blogs as authentic, transparent Web 2.0 tools to empower higher education students at Dimitrie Cantemir University in collaboration with students from the University of Valladolid (Spain), enhance motivation, enthusiasm and communicative writing content, which are relevant for their future professional expertise. The paper examines several factors that make writing difficult to teach and have to be considered when switching from traditional to computer-mediated language learning, as well as preliminary qualitative outcomes of this small-scale writing class project.

II. Factors affecting writing

2.1. Motivation

The general lack of motivation among university students is a key factor accounting for the difficulties in their use of English (Nozaki, 1993; Helgesen, 1993). In our case study the students' specific motivation is basically *instrumental* (Gardner and Lambert, 1959, 1972), i.e. students' immediate motivation is to pass the yearly exams and obtain a certificate of competence for obtaining their BA. The *integrative* type of motivation, i.e. to integrate in English speaking companies, which seems to be stronger, more immediate and long-term motivation for English learning is poor in a small town. It is only natural that English writing

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classes can become artificial *in vitro* experiments if students do not interact with the target language in their real surroundings and day-to-day activities.

2.1.1. Motivation as choice

Keller (1987, 1992) describes motivation more practically from the point of view of pedagogy. Motivation is a matter of choice, the choice of the student to take part or not. From this point of view, the aspect of the classroom most likely to affect motivation is the task and methods/tools exploited. The teacher's question then is whether the task poses enough attractiveness so as to exert a level of curiosity in the student and whether the method/tool is challenging enough so as to persuade students to choose to exert effort in order to carry out the task and be successful (Lepper et al, 1996).

From this point of view, motivation goes hand in hand with the learners' willingness to communicate. There are students who would not seize opportunities to speak in class or get involved in group writing and who are unable to develop confidence to interact orally or in written form with their peers. Although different means to provide ample opportunities to interact such as group work and pair work have become common practice in communicative approaches of our large classes, many adult higher education students feel frustrated in front of more proficient peers, lurk and lag behind finding speaking and writing in groups a daunting task. Given the appropriate asynchronous tools, however, these students can work in a safer environment at their own pace and make relevant progress.

3. Attitudes towards writing

Writing is difficult to teach and needs extensive practice. Class observation has conducted us to the empirically drawn conclusion that Business students can be resistant to writing tasks. One reason may be represented by the fact that most of them come from non-philological high-school specializations, therefore lacking a more intensive writing background and thus they may be more right-brained, analytic learners (versus left-brained, creative learners (cf. McCarthy (1980)) as confessed by one of our students: "I don't like to write. I just dislike writing, so I usually don't write if I don't need to". He, as many others, used to avoid writing tasks at school and did not fulfill the project assignments. For the majority of students, writing seemed to be centered on its utility for learning English. As a result, writing classes were often perceived as slow-paced, dry and school-related.

Other students may often find certain writing tasks irrelevant for their future profession, as essays and arguments may not entirely reflect Business students' immediate professional needs. An effective pedagogy, therefore, should narrow or close the gap between

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what is taught in pre-professional programs and what is expected on the job. Writing complaints, to give one more example, although part of the Business writing curriculum, may not be the typical key tool in addressing a problem situation. Rather, writing may be used at the end of the solving process to document results for future reference if it becomes necessary. Complaints as other rhetorical situations are, therefore, written from a business communication perspective and not so much from the perspective of employees.

Present-day businessmen write blogs, emails, have a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and communicate asynchronously or conduct Wiki projects in international companies. Although many ELT teachers are still resistant to the use of technology in their classes, innovative tools such as the ones mentioned, would help to keep their students' motivation and enthusiasm alive and are topical and relevant for the 21st Century business professionals.

4. Technology and writing in the 21st century

According to literature (cf. Juzwik et al., 2006) there has never been a higher demand for writing. In a global information economy that continually raises the bar for what counts as literacy (Brandt, 2001), writing is becoming an economic imperative (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003) because practices and uses of writing are dynamic and such forces as economy, policy and technology can shape and reshape practices, purposes and modes of writing. For example, in recent years, the rapid development of digital technologies has dramatically impacted writing in homes, schools, colleges, and workplaces.

Web 2.0 tools are relevant, easy to use and versatile, offering students challenging and motivating opportunities to learn English. Blogs which are particularly asynchronous writing tools empower students, give them a voice as well as a feeling of accomplishment and ownership while engaging them in communicative writing activities where sharing with real audiences can become a powerful means for growth.

5. Objective circumstances

Besides motivation, class attendance of adult students with outside commitments (part/full time jobs, family, commuting) is optional, therefore the EFL teacher's task is to find venues for asynchronous participation and provide out-of-class opportunities for transparent autonomous learning. Not always teaching is necessary for learning to occur. Besides, asynchronous tools can be accessed by anyone, anytime, from anywhere – an extremely valuable asset for students who cannot attend face-to-face classes.

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III. Hypothesis and Method

Starting from the premises mentioned above, we will demonstrate that presence of an authentic purpose for writing (publishing), of a real audience as well as of an enhanced interest through innovative techniques increase students' confidence, develop more positive attitudes for writing in English and increase motivation, which are likely to be conducive to authentic language learning.

The method draws on qualitative research which assumes that the research goal is to understand complex phenomena within particular contexts (Erickson, 1986). In our case, blogs were investigated as a potential motivating learning tool in the language classroom for second year Business students.

Blog writing on a subject of the students' choice, such as tourism, advertising of the Mures region and autobiographical writing, represented an alternative to classical PowerPoint projects. After a simple introductory tutorial on blog writing, students were presented the blog template which had to include at least 5 posts: their motto in life and a subject discussed in class (writing emails, faxes, leaflets, reports, etc). Students had to invite colleagues and friends to post comments and in their turn post comments on their colleagues' blogs.

In order to give students an immediate sense of real audiences, the project was given an international dimension: MA students in English Studies, undergraduates and PhD students of Translation and Interpreting as well as Erasmus students from the University of Valladolid in Spain were invited to visit, post comments and make challenging observations.

IV. RESULTS

Preliminary results show that giving students the opportunity to create individual blogs seems to generate the most significant enthusiasm for writing in English. Many students who used to be reluctant or reticent to write in class and out-of-class, opted for the blog project, found it stimulating and made appreciative comments:

"I was afraid to express myself so as anyone in the world could see 'through' myself, which is what a blog really represents: a personal journal made public. It was a real experience that has helped me improve my English and at the same time have a serious presence on the Internet" (CF).

*"Blogging is a great tool and this is an experience I will always remember: My first blog"(*EM).

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"Although this is my second blog, this is my first blog in English. I invited friends from abroad to express their opinions and I am really glad they could share with me in this way" (CB).

Equally fascinating and engaging are the visitors' comments, which range from:

- Expressing appreciation for the topics posted:

"I can't really believe how people handpaint those beautiful eggs. I think they are sooo nice. It is good about getting to know other countries' traditions because it seems as you have already visited that country!!! "(ML Spain)

"*Reading your description about the places that can be visited in Romania and the activities that can be done there have awaken my interest to visit your country!!"* (MJVS Spain)

"*From this text i deduced that Romania is so beautiful and full with mysterious places! I should visit this country this summer*!"(unknown, Hungary)

- Engaging in conversation:

"*This is a very interesting blog that promotes tourism in Romania*"(visitor)

"*Thank you very much! I had this blog since the beginning of the year so I decided to continue writing on it for my English, post other reflections in the future as all my friends liked my blog ☺It was a very nice experience*" (blog author CB)

- expressing alternatives to topics posted:

"*Another thing that is really important in my opinion is the security. Foreign people always expect to feel safe when they are abroad, that's why government tighten security in big cities, to promote tourism and to make tourists feel protected*"(Juan, Spain).

Besides engaging in purposeful and relevant communication, writing for a real audience made students approach it with more responsibility and originality, made them reedit their postings and consult the dictionary, which are essential ingredients for autonomous language development and growth.

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V. Conclusion

The paper brings qualitative evidence that social asynchronous technologies such as blogs can surpass inherent writing-in-English triggers (motivation, lack of professionally relevant, needs-coping and challenging tasks and tools, fear to communicate, optional presence at class activities).

Preliminary outcomes and interviews with the students revealed that they were extremely motivated to put forward their ideas, consider others' contributions and respond to them, which is the kind of interaction that constitutes true written communication.

The implication for language teachers is that blogs can be employed as an alternative out-of-class tool able to stimulate written communication in English. Blog writing could be appealing to teachers who consider adding some new, interactive and stimulating components to their EFL teaching of adult students.

To conclude, writing can be moved into the 21st Century and with individual blogs students have an opportunity to discover the joy of communicating their ideas, to feel enthusiasm for writing and to get feedback from a real audience. Although it is not expected that all your students will take to blogging, their going public increases transparency of our work and at the same time their own awareness, responsibility, and above all motivation, enthusiasm, and therefore growth.

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