Virtual Resource Rooms: Using Blogs to Share EFL Materials with Teachers and Students

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Abstract

Blogs are well-known for their role as online diaries, allowing millions of people worldwide to share their day-to-day thoughts and pictures. They are also recognized for the commercial opportunities they offer, with popular bloggers monetizing their sites through advertisements and others setting up blogs to promote their businesses. More recently, the educational opportunities blogs offer have been discovered, with educators increasingly willing to incorporate this learning tool into their courses. While many, myself included, use them to facilitate student-to-student interaction, there are other ways that they can be used. This academic year I started two blogging projects, one with my students and the other with my colleagues. In the first project, a blog was used to share worksheets, videos, audio recordings and other materials with my students. The students could freely access the materials but did not have any way to contribute to the site. In the second project, a blog was used to share teaching resources. All of the teachers in my department were given administrative access so in addition to being able to view and download resources, they could contribute their own materials. This article shares the results of questionnaires that were completed at the end of the academic year by the students and teachers who had access to the blogs.
Keywords: *blogs, online resources, resource sharing*

Introduction

This action research project was conducted in a women's university in Tokyo in the 2012-2013 academic year. During that period I taught eight classes that met for ninety minutes a week, with a total of approximately 190 students. In university settings there will invariably be a few students each day who are absent. Those students can have difficulty keeping up if they do not have access to the materials that were used in class and set for homework. Generally, if a student misses a class the teacher has several options. Firstly, teachers can give the materials to a student who will see the absentee before the next lesson. I have used this method and while it works in some situations, I have found it cannot be done in the first few weeks of a course as the students do not know each other well enough to meet between classes and even as the course progresses, there will always be some students that no-one offers to meet. Furthermore, I have had students offer to pass on materials then forget to do so or lose them. Another option teachers have is to put the materials in a designated collection place. For me, this place is a small box attached to my office door. Unfortunately, students seldom need to venture near my office for classes, which may explain why materials are not always picked up. Another drawback is that these methods are generally only useful for paper-based materials. Emailing materials to students can overcome this problem as materials in many different formats can be sent. This is arguably a convenient option for students. However, it can be very time consuming for teachers to write individual emails and add the relevant attachments every time a student is absent. I wanted a better way to deal with this and as there is a lot of evidence to suggest blogs can be useful administrative tools (for example, see Poore, 2013) I decided to create a resource bank for my classes using a blogging platform (Posterous.com).

After setting up the student blog, I shared the link to it with the other teachers in my department and told them they were welcome to use any of the materials. Thinking that others may like to share their materials too, I created another blog on Posterous.com to serve as a central resource bank. Surveys were conducted with teachers and students at the end of the academic year to ascertain the usefulness of the blogs. The main goals were to determine whether the blogs were beneficial enough to warrant maintaining and developing them, and if so, to gather feedback to improve the blogs. This article shares the results of the surveys and discusses them in relation to the overall aims of the blogs.

Literature Review

This article mainly aims to report on the key findings of a small action research project, focusing more on the project itself than the existing literature. However, several points in the literature warrant attention so will be briefly discussed. Firstly, the project was partly inspired by the changes technology has brought to the way schools and classrooms are viewed. The widening conceptualization of classrooms from a purely physical space to one that extends into virtual spaces has led to "a greater focus on the design and use of flexible learning spaces, more use of blended learning approaches and more personalised individualised learning opportunities for students" (Wilson and Randall, 2012). As I only meet students for 90 minutes a week and less often when they are absent, their time in the physical classroom is very limited. However, by putting the materials that I use in class or set as homework

online, and adding materials for extra study, I can give students the chance to extend their learning in a virtual classroom. Furthermore, as convincingly argued by Cope, Kalantzis and the New London Group (2000) in their work on multiliteracies pedagogy, we are living in a technology-driven age that demands a broader range of literacy skills than ever before. They emphasize the need for literacy skills in six modes of meaning: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and multimodal. Sharing materials electronically allows teachers to introduce materials in a wider range of modes. In addition to helping students develop skills within their specific area of study, offering a diverse range of modes also give them the opportunity to develop skills (such as computer skills) that will help them in other contexts.

The site for teachers was created to allow staff to share materials that would traditionally be shared in a staffroom. It is becoming increasingly rare for university teachers in Japan to have the opportunity to meet and exchange teaching ideas and resources in their workplaces. This is particularly true if teachers are working part-time, with no office hours. According to the most recent figures from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), in 2005 there were 324,083 university teachers in Japan, and slightly more than 50% of them (162,393) were employed on a part-time basis (MEXT, 2006). In my department 65% of teachers work part-time, with most only ever having contact with other teachers who work on the same day. Even full-time teachers like myself may find that they have few opportunities to talk to other teachers due to their different schedules. This severely reduces the opportunity for teachers to share resources in person, so a virtual resource room can provide a useful alternative.

Project Aims

As mentioned above, the main reasons the two websites were created was to make it easier to share information with students in my classes and to provide a platform for teachers in my department to share resources. The websites were introduced partway through the first semester. At the end of the academic year, questionnaires were administered to the students in my writing classes and the teachers in my department. The main goal of the questionnaires was to find out: a) whether students accessed the class website and used materials only when required or more often; b) aspects of the site that students did and did not like; c) the extent to which teachers used their website; d) reasons teachers did and did not use the site; and, e) the type of materials students and teachers would like to have added. This feedback was collected to help me decide whether to continue using blogs to share materials in the next academic year and, if the results suggested that the sites were worthwhile, to give me some ways to improve the sites.

The Blogs

The student and teacher blogs, which were both password protected, were set up on Posterous.com. Although they were on the same blogging platform, they were quite different in style and function. The student blog had a static page that briefly introduced the site with a list of course names at the top. Clicking on these took students to course-specific pages. Each course page had lists of resources that were grouped under sub-headings. For example, one of the classes had the sub-heading "Information for All Essays" for the following list of materials: Basic Essay Structure

Outline, Essay Correction Codes, Draft Checklists, Transition Signals Chart and Essay Report. I wanted to keep the layout simple so used hyperlinks that students could click on rather than posting the files directly to the blog as full documents. Clicking on hyperlinks within the site took students to materials in a variety of formats, including Word files, pdfs, video files, presentation slides and external websites. Non-web-based materials were kept in an online storage system (Dropbox.com) that created urls for the files, so that they could be accessed via the hyperlinks.

The teacher site was much simpler and looked more like a regular blog. Instructions for navigating around the blog and posting materials were on a static page that could be accessed by clicking a link on the blog's main page. Materials could be added either by emailing them to the blog as attachments or uploading them through the blog's posting function. Posterous.com displayed the files in preview form rather than as attachments, so small versions of the files could be seen by scrolling down the blog, and any files of interest could be enlarged and downloaded. The files were all tagged according to course and type. For example, a grade sheet for the first year writing course was tagged as "writing grade sheet" and "Freshman English Seminar". These tags were listed on the side of the blog and could be used quickly navigate to materials in each teacher's area of interest.

Results and Discussion

Part One: The Student Site

The paper-based questionnaire was completed by 57 students from three academic writing classes. Two of those students preferred not to share their results, leaving 55 respondents. The survey asked five questions about the blogs. The first two questions were closed and the other three were open-ended. Question one asked how many times students accessed the blog outside of class and question two asked how many times they used materials from it. These two questions were answered by all students. The three open-ended questions received fewer responses. Question three asked what students did and did not like about the website, question four asked what type of materials they would like to have added to the site and question five asked students to share any other comments about the site they may have. Of the 55 students whose results can be shared, 50 answered question three, 42 answered question four and 32 answered question five.

During the research period, students were required to access the site four times outside of class for homework tasks. In questions one and two, students were asked how many times they accessed the website and used materials from it. Results from question one show that while 47% accessed the site only when required or in some cases less often, the remaining 53% accessed it more often, with 31% of students accessing it seven times or more. With over half of the students accessing it voluntarily, it seems there was interest in the site.

In question two, students were asked how often they *used* materials from the site outside of class. When compared with access, usage dropped considerably, with only 36% of students reporting higher than required usage, and 64% of them only using materials when they needed to, or in some cases even less often. There are two

possible reasons for the discrepancy in access and usage. The first is that students were accessing the site but not finding what they were looking for. This could be true in some cases. However, it seems there may also have been a misunderstanding with the question's aims and the way it was understood because 20% of the students reported using materials once, twice or not at all, yet the homework completion rate was close to 100% for all tasks. This means that some students were using materials from the blog to do the set homework but did not recognize those tasks as *using* materials. In asking about access and usage, I was hoping to find out whether students were accessing the site and finding things they could use to study, or leaving disappointed because they could not find anything useful. I should have asked this more directly.

For question three, which asked what students did and did not like about the site, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The majority of comments fit into four broad categories, which will be explored below. Some students made comments about more than one category, so note that the figures refer to the number of comments about each specific category divided by the total number of students.

The two aspects of the site that received the most positive feedback were related to a) the content available and b) how easy it was to find the content within the site. These two areas were each praised by 40% of students. Comments from these areas included the following:

> "There are almost all file in the website so when I was absent from your class, I checked it and got from the file. It was nice for me because I was often absent your class."

> "I like the website because many idea of essay is here. I didn't understand many essay's rules before I watched the website."

> "We can find something we need easily because it is well placed in order."

> "I liked that it is simple. I could find the sheet I wanted to print easily."

Another key area that students mentioned was the usefulness of the site, with 'useful', 'helpful' and similar expressions used by 27% of the students. Some comments were general while others were more specific, as the following two examples show:

> "It is very helpful for me to write my essay."

> "The website helped me to think topics because there were many informations. I'm poor at finding informations of English homepages, so many links helped well. And I liked "Transitions signals chart." It was the best help for me."

10% of students also mentioned the sites accessibility, noting they could "access wherever we are" and "access all the time." As one student wrote, "I like it, because wherever or whenever I think I want to look at materials or data which introduced in the class, I can do that with [the site]."

In terms of negative feedback, there were only two comments. The first one said, "I didn't understand where I can go to get the stuff I needed in the website. I think this website has to be more easy to see." The second one said, "It was troublesome to access the website because I should have typed the URL, so I hope it will be easier to access it." The first comment shows that it is worth checking that all students know how to navigate within the blog and the second one highlights the importance of showing students how to bookmark frequently used websites.

In question four, students were asked about materials that they would like to have added to the site. 23% of students did not respond to this question and a further 20% wrote that nothing more was needed. The suggestions that were listed fit into several categories. The percentages shown are based on the number of comments about each specific category divided by the total number of students. The materials requested were essay and referencing models (16%), lists of recommended sources (11%), details of class content and homework (11%), lists of discourse markers (5%) and writing practice tasks (4%). There were also comments from individual students asking for a way to access the site without needing the URL, general essay tips, Skype and one student even requested a photograph of my daughter. The last two examples are interesting because my aim was to find out how I could use the site to help students with their essay writing and while the first one might have been a request for Skype sessions to discuss essays, the photograph of my daughter has no connection to writing. Perhaps in this depersonalized online environment, that student wanted more personalization. One way this could be addressed is through class photographs.

Question five was only completed by 32 students and the vast majority of responses either repeated information that had been given in other sections or thanked me for the course and the website. Two students added new ideas, with one saying that she had hoped to use the site more in class and the other appreciative of the fact that it covered areas that were not touched upon in the textbook. In terms of praise, there were two particularly encouraging messages that are worth sharing:

> "I was so impressed when I heard about website at first. I thought it was so great for us. Therefore, I appreciate you."

> "It was a first time of seeing this kind of site. It was very useful for writing essays. When I had some problems of writing essays, I always checked the website. Please continue making this kind of website."

Part Two: The Teacher Site

A short questionnaire was also given to the teachers in the department. Question one asked how many times teachers accessed the site, question two asked how many times they used materials from it, question three asked why they did or did not use the site, question four asked about they types of materials they would like to have added and question five asked for general comments on the site.

After the blog was created, an email explaining its purpose and information on how to access and add materials was sent to the teachers in my department. Of the seventeen teachers that were sent that message, eleven agreed to complete the questionnaire.

Question one asked how many times, if any, teachers had accessed the site. Three had not accessed it at all, three had accessed it one or twice, two had accessed it three or four times and three had accessed it seven times or more. It is hard to speculate on the usage of those who did not respond, but the results collected indicate that access by teachers was quite low. Question two showed that five out of the eight teachers that accessed the site used materials from it on at least three separate occasions, with one teacher using materials at least seven times. This was more encouraging as it suggests that if teachers found something useful on the site they returned to look for more materials and became repeat users.

Question three asked why teachers did or did not use the site. Those who used it gave the following reasons: a) to get tests and class worksheets; b) to make use of existing materials that would suit their classes ("no use reinventing the wheel"); c) to get models for making their own worksheets; and d) to align their materials with what others in the programme were using. Those who did not use anything said there were no materials for their subjects or they already had enough of their own materials. One teacher was worried that sharing tests could lead to cheating.

Question four asked for suggestions for new materials. Most of the responses were very general, asking for more materials for the subjects they were teaching, suggesting teachers share ideas or asking for "any type of activity or lesson that actively or more creatively engages the students' language skills." One teacher suggested it "may be useful to have links to sites where we have found good material." The more specific requests were for vocabulary lists, topic-based data files, answer sheets for the tests, sample essays and "ideas about how to use the text in a communicative way." One teacher also asked for a digital copy of the textbook and audio materials. This was unexpected as there were already digital copies so it highlighted the need to share information about materials that are available.

The comments in question five were mainly praise for the site, such as "I think the site is an excellent resource for teachers to be able to share/contribute successful activities and ideas" and "It is a useful site and very user-friendly." There were also two suggestions from teachers. The first one was to simplify the user name and password if possible. The user name and password were related to the name of the university and department. They were similar but not the same for security. Although I prefer to keep them different for that reason, perhaps some teachers prioritize convenience, especially as it is unlikely that the site would be hacked and the information is not highly confidential. The second suggestion was to use folders when the amount of material increased as it may become difficult to sort through. Each file had already been tagged by course name and type of resource. The request could indicate that the teacher who wrote it was not familiar with the concept of categorizing or tagging or did not notice the list. Alternatively, it may suggest that some teachers are more comfortable with folder icons rather than hyperlinks.

Although it was not on the survey, there is one last point about the teacher blog that should be mentioned. While seventeen teachers (excluding myself) had publishing access to the site, only four contributed materials to it. I was the main contributor, making fourteen of the twenty-one contributions. The other seven contributions were made by four teachers. One of those teachers posted directly, but the other three sent their materials to me to post. One tried to post directly before forwarding the file to

me but the other two sent their files to me from the start. Two of the four teachers only sent me the files after I told them how useful a printed version they gave me was and asked for their permission to add digital copies to the site. I did not set up the site just to share my materials and push teachers to share theirs, but to a certain extent this is what happened. This made me worry that I dominated the site.

Conclusion

One of the main goals of this project was to determine whether it was worth continuing using the student blog and acting as administrator for that teacher blog in the next academic year, and the results have encouraged me to do so. The feedback from students showed that many of them found the materials were useful and the blog itself was easy to use. The merits clearly make it worth continuing to use the student blog to share materials with students. The results from the teachers were less encouraging, with fewer using it than expected. Nonetheless, there were some people who benefitted from it and in time, this could develop into something that more teachers find useful. As one teacher said, "I like the idea of having a site, but as with most resource sites, it takes time to build up a base so that the resources are useful." Hopefully the site will grow in the year ahead. The other main goal of this research was to find some ways to improve the sites. Both the students and the teachers gave me some ideas on how to do this. The challenge ahead is to use those ideas to make virtual resource rooms that are even more useful to my students and colleagues.

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