

Applications of Media in an ESL Environment

Rahul Sangar, Mahidol University International College, Thailand
Alexander Nanni, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

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Abstract

All too often, EFL programs focus on developing students' language ability without concern for providing meaningful content. A previous paper by Nanni and Sangar (2014) demonstrated a technology-based approach to addressing this shortcoming, a semester-long project that fosters collaborative learning and integration with the wider community. This project has since evolved, and continues to work in the confines of an EFL program at a Thai University. One of the developments was in the area of collaborative process, which was modified to make student groups smaller and more efficient. This has led to a higher-quality project being delivered by the students. Another evolution of the project involves the recognition of the student's work through a designated YouTube channel. This increases their motivational levels, and the quality of work presented has improved over the year. Furthermore, the project has proved effective in reducing plagiarism, as the students must appear in the videos that they produce. The underlying theme of the project continues, which is the advancement of student language skills through the use of social media platforms and also being engaged citizens of the ASEAN community. In this paper, two teachers involved in designing this project will provide and discuss the results achieved through its implementation.

Keywords: EFL; Citizen Journalism; Social Media; News; E-learning; ASEAN

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Introduction

This paper presents the ongoing results from a media-based project developed at the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics at Mahidol University International College. The Preparation Center, also known as PC, offers an intensive English and mathematics program for students who wish to enter Mahidol University International College (MUIC), which is an English-medium liberal arts college within Mahidol University. The Center's mission is as follows: "to provide educational experiences which cultivate students' academic English communication skills; to foster their ability to be self-reflective and responsible learners; and to stimulate their curiosity about the world." This ethos not only prepares students for their life at MUIC but also for their future careers beyond university.

There are four levels at PC, ranging from lower intermediate (PC1) to upper intermediate (PC4). The media-based project is taught to intermediate-level EFL students who are in PC2. The objectives of PC2 require students to speak about unfamiliar topics with a reasonable level of confidence using complex sentences. Students also have to develop as young adults; maturity and responsibility are encouraged. Their writing skills are developed to the point where they can construct an essay with a clear opinion. Furthermore, their understanding of their regional environment is also developed by raising awareness through current affairs.

The PC2 project incorporates several of the above objectives and emphasizes awareness of the broader world, specifically ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Such awareness is critical as the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) will integrate at the end of 2015. The project cultivates regional awareness by requiring students to create a six-minute news bulletin in English. The bulletin is about an ASEAN country, and it compares issues that relate to their chosen country and to Thailand. To create the bulletin, students must utilize news-gathering skills and apply social media tools.

This is a new project that encourages critical thinking, enabling students to increase their awareness of regional events while developing their English skills, thereby upholding the values that are the foundation of the liberal arts program at MUIC. The approach incorporates aspects of media journalism, such as research, appropriate content, story structure, camera technique, shot selection, writing, and editing, as well as aspects of citizen journalism.

Citizen Journalism

The role of journalism continues to evolve as technology gives more people access to information and opinion. The traditional role of journalists as guardians of truth and those who check the power of authority has evolved. People without a journalism background also have taken up these roles through citizen journalism. They "have emerged as the vanguard of new social movements dedicated to promoting human rights and democratic values" (Radsch, 2011, p. 61).

According to Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 9) citizen journalism is the “act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information, in order to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information. This suggests that in today’s world where technology abounds and is increasingly accessible, everyday people can now take an active role in disseminating information and rebroadcasting it through various media platforms, without the professional rigour required by traditional journalists. Now, meaningful journalism is no longer conducted solely by professionals. Civic-minded individuals are also able to produce and distribute meaningful content: “In many respects, citizen journalism is simply public journalism removed from the journalism profession” (Barlow, 2007, p. 181). The traditional media of newspapers, TV and radio have taken time to incorporate this phenomenon. No longer do audiences just digest news from news organizations. They want to interact, they want to provide content, and they want to be involved in their community, whether local, regional, national, or global.

Cooperation between traditional media and citizen journalism also exists. One example of citizen journalism and traditional media melding to allow people to share opinion and help change society is the approach taken in India, where in 2005 the Cable News Network-Indian Broadcasting Network (CNN-IBN), an English-language Indian television news channel, enabled “the citizens of India a platform to articulate the issues concerning them, like corruption, politics, education, health, society, so on and so forth. The trend was later followed by several other media organizations” (Noor, 2012, p. 4). This is not an isolated example. As integration of user-generated content becomes commonplace, it is increasingly evident that “engagement and collaboration with the audience should not be considered an afterthought but rather an integral component of a brave new world” (Duffy, 2011, p. 21).

Citizen journalism has enabled ordinary citizens to express their opinions, in turn empowering them to effect change. In part, the power of citizen journalism springs from the absence of strict editorial guidelines. Another source of citizen journalism’s power is the ability to deliver a collective message. Citizen journalists include teachers, businessmen, farmers, and students — people who are “not bound by the conventional term of a journalist” (Noor, 2012, p. 5). Their messages resonate with the public as they come from ordinary people.

This emerging form of journalism is creating a challenge for traditional media outlets as it enables communities in a local, regional or global context to have a voice and not to be sidelined by media organizations that may have vested interests. Citizen journalists often have much more personal investment in local stories than traditional journalists. They are also typically less motivated by profit. These factors can result in a more accurate portrayal of local events. It has been suggested that citizen journalism is “promising a scenario of breaking free from media bias as well as taking local news on a global platform” (Noor, 2012, p. 6).

One of the key outcomes of citizen journalism is empowerment. Now other major news outlets incorporate new media to enable citizen journalists to express their point of view. There are programs on traditional media broadcast sites that discuss the concept of citizen

journalism, including BBC (*Citizen journalism 6minutes English*, 2011) and PBS (*Your guide to citizen journalism*, 2006). These examples highlight that the use of new technologies will empower citizens to participate, explore, and learn. They will be empowered in terms of both expression and self-confidence. Citizen journalism is the way of the future, and its application in a program geared towards preparing students to enter a liberal arts college seems a natural step. An understanding of the issues where one lives and the skills to express this understanding are critical both in citizen journalism and in liberal arts education.

The Project

The media-based project described below was previously presented in “At One with ASEAN: Connecting Students Through a Collaborative Media-Based Project,” which was published in the proceedings of the Asian Conference on Technology in the Classroom 2014 (Nanni & Sangar, 2014). Since its inception more than a year ago, the project has undergone several significant modifications. That being said, the premise of the project still remains the same: to engage students about the broader world, in this case ASEAN.

The project runs over a ten-week period, and students can choose to either work in pairs or individually. Most choose to work in pairs, where they divide the roles of producer, presenter, and editor. The roles help to develop different aspects of EFL learning. The producing role involves creating the story and providing the research, the presenting role develops speaking and listening skills, and the editing role helps with the overall comprehension of the story and formatting the story in a logical and chronological order. The students not only develop their language skills, but also develop their technology skills, applying basic camera techniques and shot selections as well as video editing and post-production.

The students are advised by teachers, who play the role of executive producer. On a regular basis over the ten week period, students’ progress is assessed to make sure they are achieving the objectives of producing a six-minute news and current affairs segment. The teachers advise students on basic shot selection and issues of lighting and sound. Students, however, learn quickly through the process of inquiry and curiosity as to what works best. Their source material is from traditional media sources (e.g., TV and online newspapers) instead of blogs.

The students research their topic, which could focus on anything that is newsworthy, including politics, business, sport, tourism, health issues or human rights issues. They then have to research and write a 550-word essay on their topic of interest and use the essay to develop their scripts for their on-air presentations. The speaking component of the project is based on their scripts as well two short interviews. In the interviews, students ask experts, such as PhD students or professors, questions that are relevant to the ASEAN country that they chose. The final package is edited using software available on the Internet and then presented to the class.

Previously, students worked in groups of three, and all members of a group received the same grade. Many students felt that responsibilities were distributed unevenly, and some

felt this was unfair. Student comments reflected this: “I think this should be individual work not because if I do the project better than my partner, she/he will be my burden. On the other hand if my work is worse, I will be his/her burden too” (student comment from 2014 survey). Other students preferred to work with their own friends rather than work in teams assigned by the teacher: “It is individual work I did not do it with my team, I did it with my close friends in class” (student comment from 2014 survey). The project has now been modified to allow students to work in pairs or as individuals. If students choose to work in pairs, they are able to choose their own partners. Teachers now assess the projects individually, and the feedback from the students has been far more positive.

New media is primarily used in the forms of Facebook, Instagram and other similar media platforms mainly designed for social interaction. Incorporating new media and the concept of citizen journalism expands the students’ horizons as to what is happening outside of their immediate social circle on to a broader platform, yet still utilizes new media tools and skills. Through this process of inquiry, the students develop citizen journalism skills but more importantly their language skills.

The students also receive recognition for their efforts. Teachers nominate the best videos in each class. These videos are shown to all of the PC2 students, who vote to select the best videos. The news stories that are of the highest quality are recognised during the orientation day ceremony the following term and played in front of prospective students and their parents. They are then posted on a YouTube channel, where students can comment on the videos as well as share their efforts with their friends, thereby incorporating the social aspect of new media as well as displaying both their skills as citizen journalists and as EFL students.

Outcomes

Overall, the results of the media-based project have been positive. In January of 2014 and again in January of 2015, students completed a nine-question survey about their satisfaction with the project. The survey used a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 was deemed “completely disagree” and 7 deemed “completely agree.” In 2014, a total of 27 students were surveyed, and in 2015 a total of 69 students completed the survey. The level of enthusiasm for the project increased markedly over a one-year period, with the average score about the level of interest in the project increasing from 4.72 to 5.10. Overall, the trend was upwards over a 12-month period with the average score on all questions rising from 5.10 to 5.32. The most significant increases occurred in the area of awareness and understanding of current events in the ASEAN region. The average response to the question about whether the project helped students learn about ASEAN increased from 4.86 to 5.38, and the average response to the question about whether the project helped students learn about current events increased from 5.00 to 5.76. The level of interest in current events also increased from 4.59 to 5.24.

Students also showed great initiative by providing an online tutorial on how to record quality audio (May, 2014). This exemplifies how new media and social media are being utilized not only to develop students’ language skills but also to increase their acquisition of knowledge.

One downward trend was the question about whether the project helped develop teamwork. This was rated at 5.55 in 2014 and decreased to 4.86 in 2015. Perhaps this was a result of the modifications to the project where students could choose to work in pairs or as individuals. This result suggests that in the future the project may be best suited for individual rather than group work.

The PC2 project...	Avg. Q1 2014	Avg. Q1 2015
... was interesting.	4.72	5.10
... helped me to learn about ASEAN.	4.86	5.38
... helped me to learn about current events.	5.00	5.76
... helped me to meet other students in my class.	5.21	5.28
... helped me to improve my study skills.	5.10	5.28
... helped me to meet other people outside of my class.	5.48	5.45
... helped me to learn to work as a team.	5.55	4.86
... helped me to get better at using technology.	5.38	5.55
... helped me to become more interested in current events.	4.59	5.24
Average overall:	5.10	5.32

Figure 1. Results of survey about media-based project.

The key benefits that students seem to gain from the project are an increase in the use of technology, improvement in their EFL skills, and a greater awareness of their region. In this sense, the project is achieving its goal of using citizen-journalism skills to further develop EFL skills while increasing the awareness of the students' knowledge of current issues in the ASEAN region.

Students sharpen their speaking skills through the news reports and interviews, listening skills through the interviews with experts, and writing skills through preparation of their 550-word essay. The assessment is made clear through the grading rubric provided on the students' website. The rubric clarifies how students are assessed and provides guidelines for creating their work.

The comments from the students reflect the overall increases in the positive responses from the students as well: "PC2 project helped me learned more vocabulary and interesting fact about the ASEAN country I did project about" (student comment from 2015 survey). There were also positive responses on how the project helped students improve their English: "PC2 term project prove to be effective way for students to improve their English communication" (student comment from 2015 survey).

The media-based project is comprised of activities that are hard to plagiarise. Many students took a copy-and-paste approach to completing previous projects, with no genuine attempt to disseminate information and deliver this information in their own words. To complete this media-based project, students must cite recent news sources. They cannot copy papers from previous quarters as one of the prerequisites of any news story is that it has to be up to date and relevant. Furthermore, the requirement that students appear in the videos that they produce limits the amount of work that could be done by a ghostwriter.

Conclusion

This paper has described an application of the principles of citizen journalism to an EFL course. It is important to note that the course does not aim to be a journalism course but rather uses basic tools and skills required of journalists to better students' English. That is, the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics is not attempting to create journalism students per se but to use the fundamentals of journalism to better prepare students to enter an English-medium university program. The rigours applied to basic journalism are still the same: factual sources, grammatically-correct language, and informative yet thought-provoking stories.

Authenticity of learning is the aim of the project. Truly authentic learning must look beyond the classroom: "The materials and activities of the learning environment reflect or recreate some aspect of the world outside of school [A]uthentic activity includes anything that works" (Shaffer & Resnick, 1999, p. 198). In this case, the synergy between citizen journalism and language learning creates opportunities for students to develop their language, technology, and media skills through real-world applications.

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