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ҚР ПРЕЗИДЕНТІ ЖАНЫНДАҒЫ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК БАСҚАРУ АКАДЕМИЯСЫ
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DID YOU READ MY NEW POST?: IMPROVING AUTONOMY, ENGLISH, AND ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CLASS BLOGS

ОҚУ БЛОГТАРЫ АРҚЫЛЫ ДЕРБЕСТІКТІ, АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІ ЖАТЫҚТЫҒЫН ЖӘНЕ БЕЛСЕНДІЛІКТІ ЖЕТІЛДІРУ

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Resume

This paper explores the potential of using blogs in the Academic English classroom, especially in an international foreign language setting. The main topics covered include 1) the broad shifts in pedagogy toward student autonomy and engagement; 2) the specific improvements to English writing fluency; 3) the hurdles students and instructors face in participating in open, online communication; and 4) the practical steps needed to set up and implement a class blog.

Резюме

Бұл баяндама "Академиялық ағылшын тілі" пәнін оқу барысында, әсіресе халықаралық шет тілді ортада, блогтарды пайдалану мүмкіндігін талқылайды. Мұнда келесі маңызды тақырыптар қарастырылады: 1) педагогиканы оқушы дербестігі мен белсенділігіне қарай ілгерілеу; 2) Ағылшын тілінде жазу жатықтығының нақты жетілдірулері; 3) оқушылар мен мұғалімдердің ашық және интерактивті режимде байланысуға қатысуында кездесетін қиыншылықтар; and 4) оқу блогын ұйымдастыру мен оны пайдалануға арналған практикалық қадамдары.

Key words: blogs, academic English, English classroom, international foreign language setting, pedagogy, autonomy, engagement

1. Introduction

Broad changes in pedagogy over the last half century reflect a fundamental shift in the relationships between students, teachers and the learning process. Teachers have long been the center of the classroom in which almost all student interaction was mediated through them (Kalantzis & Cope, 2010). This traditional learning environment is characterized by quiet, obedient students writing notes from a chalkboard and occasionally answering questions from the teacher. The twentieth century gave rise to alternative teaching methods that challenged this status quo, including Montessori and other independent schools (Varden, 2003). These new classrooms are much more student-centered, focusing on group and pair work with lots of student-student interaction. Students are thought to be generating knowledge and understanding (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006), as opposed to simply receiving it from their instructors.

In the same vein, information technology (IT), especially the widespread availability of the internet in schools and homes, has similarly shifted the culture of worldwide media and the exchange of ideas. Like modern student-centered classrooms, internet media culture is no longer centered on a few big network conglomerations, but rather is decentralized and participatory. The rise of so-called "web 2.0" mirrors an emphasis on the user as producer and generator of content rather than simply consumer (Alexander, 2006).

This paper aims to unpack some of the potential benefits and risks of incorporating IT into the foreign language English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom, namely teaching writing through the use of blogs. While a full-scale quantitative analysis of this topic has not been conducted here (see Churchill, 2009 for one), the insights below extend from the use of blogs in a variety of EAP classrooms, from secondary to university levels. These experiences highlight

substantial gains in engagement and writing fluency, significant challenges in navigating the fraught landscape of online writing, and the practical steps of starting and managing a successful classroom blog.

2. Experienced gains

In the ideal academic setting, students come to class eager to learn, full of questions and energy. The ideal foreign language learner approaches with vigor the task of learning to write clearly, concisely and confidently. Every day is rewarding. Every student is immersed in learning. It is no surprise that few, if any, teachers have seen an ideal classroom or student. In a typical EAP classroom, when it comes to teaching writing, instructors rely on textual examples, practice essays, and error correction, repeated for each new unit ad infinitum. These classrooms can still demonstrate student-centered teaching through careful and creative planning (Douglas, 2014). Online writing environments, such as blogs, however, create the necessity for natural and authentic communication between students and teachers, as well as among the students themselves.

Within the first few days of blogging, student motivation and engagement is the first to change. Perhaps it is simply the change of environment that jars students into action. In the traditional EAP classroom, essay topics are often chosen by the instructor, along with a list of requirements for the number of words, paragraphs or references needed. Students write and may self-revise, or even peer edit, and then submit the paper to the instructor. The ideas, grammar, argument, syntax, and so on are assessed and the student receives feedback on the writing. Most often the papers are never discussed orally and very little real communication of ideas occurs. One fundamental difference of the blog is that all writing is posted online in a public forum whose sole purpose is to give open access to the ideas presented within. This public forum, where anyone can read, comment on and discuss a student's ideas, puts considerable pressure on students to do their best work in order to communicate their ideas clearly, concisely and in an interesting way.

A long history of literature supports the need for authenticity in communicative activities in teaching foreign languages (Savignon, 1987; Mulling, 2007). On a blog, students are reading each other's work and leaving comments which form a natural dialogue about topics the students care about. Classroom blogs where students are given loose guidelines about the topic and format can be a successful tool to engage students both in and out of the classroom. Due to the static nature of a blog and our nearly ubiquitous access to the internet, students report being drawn back repeatedly, often several times a day, to check for new comments on their work. In class, several students greet each other or the instructor asking, "Did you read my new post?" This approach supports a "deep constructivist" view of teaching that students today should be encouraged to find ways of integrating themselves into a society that values continuously creating and expanding knowledge (Scardmalia & Bereiter, 2002). Learning is a social endeavor, a fact which the EAP classroom often ignores, and which blogs help reinforce.

Over time, the fluency of student writing naturally improves. There is, however, an important distinction in the type of progress that is noticed compared to typical paper-based essay writing. Good academic writing is not the same thing as fluency in a foreign language. Many language learning students develop a style of writing comparable to that of a government manual from the nineteenth century rather than a clear and natural style. This stems in part from the types of texts students read and the vocabulary they learn. A vocabulary test of one group of university students revealed a significant gap in mid-range vocabulary (Coxhead, 2006). Not surprisingly, students score well in the lower level vocabulary sections—the 2,000-word level such as *coffee*, *blame*, *elect*; and the 3,000-word level such as *atmosphere*, *resolve*, *slender*. They also do quite well in the high level "Academic Vocabulary" (between 5,000 and 10,000-word level)—words like *accumulation*, *prelude* and *explicit*. However, in the middle range—5,000-word level like *switch*, *contemplate* and *adequate*—students scored rather low. A blog encourages students to read and write more on an understandable level of English, effectively narrowing this middle vocabulary gap and developing a more natural or "native" writing style.

3. Difficulties in navigation

In some cases, classroom blogs present substantial obstacles to students. These include issues of student responsibilities, personal confidence, style issues and controversial topics. Each of these is a natural adjustment that needs to be overcome in the process of navigating a new learning environment.

Developing student autonomy is one difficult task for teachers. Students, especially at the university level, should be working largely independently as self-reflective critical thinkers. Although our ideal student mentioned above requires no external motivation or inspiration, the average EAP student may need a push. In a classroom blog, students can be required to publish short essays or posts on topics of their choosing. This task places the onus of responsibility for the writing, from start to finish, on the student. This is a key example of the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning and of web 1.0 to web 2.0. The student is the author, editor, producer and publisher of his or her own work. The teacher, in turn, plays a supporting, guiding role.

Many students will have difficulty in choosing topics and publishing their work online, as it most likely throws the student out of their comfort zone. Self-doubt and hesitation to present one's writing in a public forum are natural reactions to a new and initially frightening challenge. This risk, however, can easily be mitigated by the encouragement of the instructor, along with example posts from other similar blogs, and clear guidelines that the activity is to develop fluency, not necessarily accuracy.

In this shift from in-class to online writing, style issues of formality, slang, and citations are likely to arise. Initially, student writing may resemble an online chatroom or social media profile page, with students opening their writing with personal greetings—"Hi guys =)"—and a highly subjective tone—"I really hope you like this piece." This seemingly disastrous turn of events in an EAP classroom is in reality an opportunity for an intentional discussion on the issues of genre, bias, style, voice and purpose of writing. These topics, while essential to any EAP classroom, are difficult to teach using contrived scenarios and assignments, but much less so when produced in this organic fashion.

Finally, in the same way that student autonomy leads inevitably to the issue of appropriate style, it raises the issue of appropriate content. Blogs are a useful platform for broaching the subjects of current events and controversial topics. Issues along the lines of religion, violence, sex and drugs may enter into this informational space as students search for topics of interest to write about. An unfortunate response to this is censorship, either by the teacher, the school/university, or even the internet provider or the government. As Burbules and Callister (1999) saliently argue,

"Such censorship is antithetical to the sorts of educational and democratic ideals society holds for schools. How can students learn to discern, discriminate, synthesize, or evaluate? How can they learn to make good choices, social and intellectual, if the choices are made for them by restricting the information they can and cannot see? Censorship in a technical environment does not just remove information, it unpredictably prevents access to other information. Moreover, and at a deeper level, the development of skills of discernment, judgment, criticality, and so forth require that one encounter and deal with materials that is unpleasant, misleading, offensive, and so forth. It is through engagements with such material that one can become more resistant to them: by making a choice that it is unworthy or immoral." (p. 111)

Only by allowing students to grapple with difficult topics will the EAP classroom produce critically aware students who can respectfully and productively set aside, or better yet confront and address, personal and cultural biases that cloud so much of the international information sphere. Admittedly, this is easier said than done, as any teacher or blogger resisting institutional or governmental censorship can attest.

4. A short "how-to"

In practical terms, blogs require little technological know-how, due to the low barriers to access characteristic of web 2.0 platforms. Large blogging websites are almost always free, and a class

blog can be set up in a matter of minutes with an email address. Wordpress.com, Blogspot.com and Edublogs.org are just a few of the most popular platforms. After logging in and setting up the appearance and design, all that is needed is to invite students via email to create accounts so that they can publish content on the blog. The teacher is most often the administrator who can edit or delete any post, and the students are authors who can only add and edit their own writing, plus comment on the writings of other users. In more advanced blogs, some users can be given “editor” status in which they must approve new posts before they are published.

Issues of privacy and identity may be of concern to younger students, but can be solved by applying closed settings to the blog. In this case, a blog can be password protected so that only the students have access to it. Another possible solution is the creation of anonymous usernames. While the teacher may still need to know who is who for grading and managing the interactions on the blog, any outside reader would not know who the author is. In addition to privacy concerns, students may feel greater confidence in writing behind an assumed name.

5. Conclusion

EAP students can make considerable gains in fluency, autonomy and engagement through the use of classroom blogs. However, these advantages are not guaranteed, as student attitude and confidence, teacher expectations of style and content, as well as institutional or governmental censorship can all cause a class blog to fail. Any instructor approaching the subject of class writing blogs or any other IT available today should do so with a clear plan, healthy skepticism and an open mind.

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