JMLE

Voices from the Field:
Obtaining, Processing, and Constructing English:
Blogging in the ESL Classroom

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Those who can, do; those who can't, teach. That odious adage, insulting to teachers everywhere, might be said of me and my teaching practice. You see, I am a middle-aged digital immigrant, a phrase coined by Prensky (2001) to refer to someone not born in the digital age, not weaned on the multimodalities of computers, video games, and mp3 players. As befits my digital immigrant status, I have been slow to embrace some of the new technologies and their accompanying literacies. I have never uploaded to YouTube and don't have a MySpace page. Only recently have I started to carry my cell phone with me on a regular basis, and I have only sent and received a few text messages. However, despite my lack of digital experience and expertise, I am a proponent of media literacy education. In fact, though I haven't enjoyed my limited personal experience with blogging, I recently did a successful blogging project with one of my classes and now plan to make blogging a regular routine in my classroom.

I teach English as a Second Language (ESL) at a high school in Provo, Utah. The majority of my English language learners (ELLs) are Spanish-speakers and the majority of those students are from Mexico. About twenty percent of my students are from South Korea. Other students are from Brazil, Chile, China, Columbia, Ecuador, Honduras, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Peru, Spain, Taiwan, and Venezuela. One of the things I love about teaching ESL is that the subject matter is wide open. As long as the students are reading, writing, and conversing in English, we can study anything from art to zoology. We learn vocabulary, parse grammar, and write essays, but the underlying content is my choice. That is not to say it is irrelevant. I choose topics that I think are important for my stu-

dents as newcomers to the United States; for example we often read and discuss American history, culture, and current events, or explore issues that affect their lives.

In addition to ESL, I also teach mainstream United States history and government and several years ago I became aware that many of the ELLs were less comfortable with computer use than their native-English speaking peers. By dates of birth, my ELLs should all be digital natives (Prensky 2001) but, unfortunately, few of them have had the advantages of a digital lifestyle. To help alleviate this digital divide, I often add technological and multimedia requirements to my ESL course curriculum.

To fully acculturate into society, ELLs need to be conversant with the language and culture of their peers. The National Association for Media Literacy (NAMLE) asserts that media, including the electronic media, are an integral component of modern culture and function as an agent of socialization. They assert that to be literate in the 21st century, students must learn to process their own meanings and construct their own media messages. NAMLE further argues that media education is essential for all who wish to become informed, engaged members of a democratic society (2009).

If media literacy is a valuable—indeed essential—component of education for mainstream students, English language learners must also be given this learning opportunity. Schools and teachers should never deny ELLs the curriculum that they deem is important for others. The students will be immersed in the multimodalities of the new media throughout their lives; they need to learn how to use it and how to critically analyze it. Additionally, there are special consid-

erations that make media literacy especially useful for someone learning English. The language barrier that prevents ease of communication is greatly alleviated by the visual, aural, and tactile nature of electronic media. This helps to make the language and the content very comprehensible (Lee 2006). An ELL may miss, or misunderstand, the verbal component of a media image. The more he or she is taught to pay attention to and comprehend the other signifiers, the further ahead he or she will be (Hawisher et al. 2004). Teachers must help all students become technologically multiliterate (Becker 2000; Lee 2006; Miller 2004). For all of these reasons, I began to incorporate media literacy and the new technologies into my teaching practice.

Reflect

Plan

Observe

Act
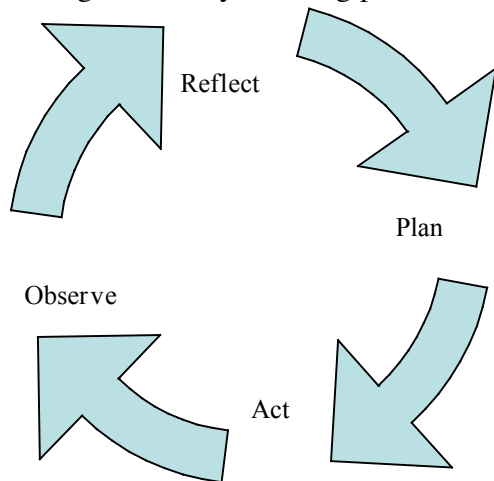
The Blogging Project

Like many English language arts and ESL teachers, I have required my students to turn in a weekly reading log. In order to facilitate more computer usage, I began requiring them to complete and submit their reading logs online using Moodle, a free course management service that is recommended by our district. As the 2008-09 school year began, I modified the reading logs once again to online *media* weblogs or blogs. I expanded the requirements beyond basic reading, to include the multiple literary modes of the 21st century. I did this as part of an action research project for my master's thesis.

The action research cycle is generally given as a four-step cycle of reflect → plan → act → observe. That is: reflecting on your practice and identifying a problem or concern you have, planning a strategy or intervention that may solve the problem, acting or carrying out the plan, and finally, observing the results or collecting the data. The goal of action research is to experiment with making a positive difference in your professional practice as you conduct research.

Within this model, I looked closely at my teaching practice with ELLs and wondered what new technique or technology I might employ to draw my students into greater use of written English. I read articles by English (2008), Pyon (2007), and Ware (2004), teachers who had positive results with classroom blogging, and was intrigued by this idea. I decided to try blogging with my students and see if it would help them in the pursuit of English proficiency. I designed the blogging assignments and observed the student processes as I gave them classroom time to blog. The students were asked to report on their reading, listening, and viewing of various media and to read and respond to the blogs of fellow students. As part of a larger study, I interviewed a focus group to gain a greater understanding of the students' experiences. I hope that my study will demonstrate how applying media and media literacy skills in the ESL classroom might enrich that practice and help other ESL educators make decisions about what classroom practices they may try.

My goal in this article is to briefly document ways that my students *obtained*, *processed* and *constructed* English, terms taken from the standards published in 2006 by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). These three skills are roughly equivalent to traditional reading, writing, and comprehension, but are more useful in describing the skills of the multiple literacies needed for the multi-modalities of modern life. They are generally intertwined, but in the following sections I have attempted to separate the evidence of all three discrete skills.

Obtaining English

To obtain language refers to the receptive skills of reading, viewing, and listening. I hoped that using a blogging instrument would encourage the students to this end. Just going to the class blog to find the assignments required them to "receive English," but I also specifically assigned them receptive activities such as figuring out how to personalize their blogs, reading the blogs of classmates, and searching the internet for images to put on their blogs. Knowing how to access such information is an important step in obtaining language. They also needed to report on receptive activities, such as reading or watching movies, whether it was done for school or recreation. I was looking for evidence of the English messages that the students accessed and obtained.

The students increased their access (obtaining) of English through internet searches. Shin, a junior from South Korea, said he thought this aspect of the blogging project helped his language proficiency the most, "… as I was preparing the assignments, I had to read a lot and surf the internet. So, it helped me to develop my English skills." He later added, "It also helps us to do our homeworks in other class."

I really hadn't thought that the required internet searching would be a significant source of obtaining English. It seemed minimal to me and I hadn't considered that the students would think it was "a lot." Also, because Shin is a student of high academic achievement and at this point was ready to move into a mainstream English class, I was surprised that he would consider searching the internet difficult enough that it would result in an increase in his English ability.

Most students eagerly wrote about obtaining English through movies, television, music, and video games, but Eunju, a freshman from South Korea, went a step further, "I also watched TV and it was really helpful me to practice listening [to] English....it was really interesting and their fast lines were good for practicing real English."

As when Shin explained the value of internet searching, I was pleased to see Eunju could watch a movie for recreational purposes, yet realize that trying to comprehend the rapid-fire dialogue had a language-proficiency benefit. It showed that she was paying attention to the language, not just letting herself be immersed in the visual experience. Paying attention to the words you hear or read— recognizing differences between language patterns—is a key to continual improvement.

The blogging project was largely successful as an exercise in obtaining English. Based on comments they left on the class blog, posts they published and images they uploaded on their blogs, there was evidence that 22 of the 24 students had accessed the class blog and read and viewed what I had posted. The fact that they responded appropriately to the messages obtained is evidence of basic processing.

Processing English

To process English is to understand a message on both the surface and deeper levels; it is analyzing and evaluating a message. In their blog posts the students demonstrated their understanding and gave analyses of books, film, news stories and of electronic media itself. It is easier to identify examples of processing the language, rather than just obtaining it, because that is usually overtly assigned and must be presented by the students. All of the blogging assignments asked them to process and explain their experiences. Examples of my questions include, "What has been your experience in reading *Persepolis* (a graphic novel of the 1979 Iranian Revolution that we had been reading)? Does knowing that this is a true story affect your reaction to it?" Shin wrote, "As I've been reading *Persepolis*, I was able to understand about Iran and the situation in the country. I think the cartoon was easier for me to understand it very well."

Francisca, a highly-literate freshman from Mexico, started her response by explaining a connection to the author through their common humanity, a fairly abstract idea for a fourteen year old. Then she explains the concrete skills she used to obtain basic comprehension. Returning to the abstract, Francisca alludes to finding strength through the examples of other people who have endured difficult times.

> *I realized that Marji and I have a lot of things in common, I really liked it. Every time I started a new page, before reading anything I just looked at the pictures, so what I was reading could make sense.* Persepolis *was true story … it made me see that there is people (real people) that has been through hard things, but they just kept going....*

Francisca may have mixed her higher and lower level processing together in her explanation, but it is clear that she did both and understands that two separate levels of understanding were present. Connecting what you read to information gained in other areas of your life is a hallmark of a good reader and learner. Such connections deepen understanding and increase the chances that you will remember the information.

I think the most revealing personal message came from Eunju. She explains how she once felt about Islamic people and why. She goes on to explain that she now realizes she was wrong:

> *...I had some prejudices about all of the Islam countries ; the people who live in the Islam countries might be all extremists and I would never visit that countries. Why don't they resist against unreasonable regulations? etc. After reading the "Persepolis", I regreted for my prejudice and became*

> *really sorry for Islam people including*
> *Iranian people. Also, I [came to know]*
> *that there were many people who died*
> *against unreasonable system of society*
> *and for the democracy of the country.*

It strikes me that Eunju's processing resulted in a huge personal leap in her consciousness. Though processing is what I was looking for, it would not have been evident without her subsequent construction of a comprehensible message.

Constructing English

All of the evidence that demonstrates obtaining and processing of English relies on the construction of a new, synthesized, communication. I asked questions and required the students to construct English messages: What do you think...? What has been your experience...? What is your opinion...? Summarize... Compare your feelings... As the students reported on their English activities, or explained the meaning and connections they made from their various media experiences, they were necessarily constructing new messages. When Mei, a Japanese girl in her junior year, explained that before she "didn't intrest about Iran, but now I am intresting about Iran more" she was synthesizing her experience and sending out a new text to the world. Though there are many deviations from standard English, the new constructions can be comprehended by other English speakers who may gain new understanding and synthesize their own new texts.

Some of the constructions were short and to the point, like "I agree with [Maria]" or maybe, "I agree with what [Min] said on his blog ..." In general, however, the students wrote more than I am used to seeing when they are assigned informal pen and paper writing. I examined the notebook journals of four randomly-selected students and found an amazing 68 percent increase in the volume of writing. It was not a scientific, quantitative comparison, but I selected journal entries that were responses to prompts similar to the prompts for the blogs. I then counted and compared the average number of words written in each. Hung, a sophomore boy from Hong Kong, showed the smallest difference, with an average of 43 words on paper and 57 on his blog, a 25 percent divergence. Maricela, a senior from Ecuador, wrote 46 versus 147 words, paper to blog, for a gain of 69 percent. Elisabete, a sophomore from Brazil, wrote an average of just 38 words per journal entry, but 144 per blog post, a variation of 74 percent. And Mei, the Japanese

girl quoted earlier, wrote an average of 25 words per journal entry, but 125 per blog post, an incredible 80 percent increase.

In addition to greater volume, I was hopeful that the public nature of the project would affect greater care in the students' writing. Several of the students recognized this tendency. Maricela explained her thought processes as she completed assignments:

> *...it's like, public space, everyone can*
> *see it ... you'll be like, "oh, I cannot*
> *put some [not] serious stuff. I need to*
> *search for something like smart, so*
> *people can see I am smart person.*

Shin admitted, "I just wanted to look good and everything cool." Mei said that she "tried to ... spell really correctly and I tried to write correct grammar."

Conclusion

I found blogging to be very useful for helping ELLs obtain, process, and construct English. The individual questions and writing prompts for the blogging project were no more intuitive or provoking than many other assignments I have given over the years, but the "cool factor" of doing the assignments in a blogging format, seems to have made a difference, resulting in higher volume and more attention to quality than most other writing assignments. Several students told me that they thought it was a good way to motivate teenagers. Shin said,

> *I think blogging is really good for us*
> *because... we are more interested in*
> *internet and... on the paper it would*
> *be boring. On the blogs you can do it*
> *many other things, like put the pictures.*

There was general agreement with Shin's feelings. Elisabete said, "It is better than just do your homework because when you are doing your blogging you can surf the internet and do other stuff that you like." Francisca agreed, "I think its better than doing homework. I can do other things, too. I can check my email and do homework at the same time." And Hung chimed in with, "I think it's better than writing on paper."

The only thing unique about the assignments from this project is that they were online and made use of the multimodalities in today's media world. It is a new way to engage in the traditional skills of reading and writing and to demonstrate understanding.

Many teachers may find blogging is useful because it has great flexibility to serve multiple content areas. My students blogged about their media literacy experiences. Ware (2004) had college age ELLs discuss and debate via Blackboard, an online discussion tool. Pyon (2008) had third graders discuss how to solve math problems, offering each other suggestions and solutions. The students of English (2007), a high school literature teacher, developed threaded discussions about their assigned reading. A social studies teacher might post articles on a class blog and ask students to comment, creating an online discussion. For ESL teachers, or teachers that have ELLs in their mainstream classrooms, there are additional reasons to try classroom activities or assignments that use the new technologies.

- ELLs often need visual support or other scaffolding to grasp a new concept and many of the new literacies offer such. The visual, aural, and tactile nature of electronic media make the language and the content very comprehensible (Lee, 2006).
- In a classroom infused with the multimodalities of new technology, an ELL will not just hear or see the lesson, but hear and see simultaneously.
- The spoken or written word will be illustrated and animated—with each additional modality, comprehension will be multiplied exponentially.
- While we bridge the digital divide, we are also constructing bridges to understanding

.

As mentioned at the beginning, I am a digital immigrant and I am not particularly adept or even enamored with new technologies. This was a challenging classroom project for me and I encountered many technical difficulties. Most of these problems were related to the lack of expertise of the bloggers, myself included. I was not very familiar or comfortable with the blogging instrument before introducing it to the students and I should have been. If I had posted several times on the class blog, with various elements and uploads, before I showed the students, it would have accomplished two important feats. I would have been forced to learn more about the details of how to organize a blog and I would have had some examples with which to entice the students into figuring out how to blog. As it was, I had only chosen colors and a design, and posted one, text only, message. Most of

the students knew little or nothing about blogging. My anemic demonstration, followed by one digital immigrant teacher trying to connect 24 students, was less than inspiring. Beyond the work of a few technically adept computer-literate students, there were a lot of half-hearted attempts and long waits for help.

Though I would recommend that other teachers learn from my mistakes and figure out more of the details before they introduce blogging, this action research project was successful. The learning curve was steep. I received a bit of technical assistance from a colleague and I figured out how to blog and how to assist the students in blogging. For me as a teacher, the blogging project was not an easy nor a comfortable classroom activity, but I believe its value overrides my difficulties and I will continue to incorporate blogging into my classroom practices.

For teachers, as well as for students, the ability to use online technology is vital for full participation in the 21st century. The understanding and use of digital technology is not a luxury—it is essential for young adults moving into higher education or careers in our global economy. As the NAMLE mission statement asserts: "Individuals of all ages [need to] develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators, and active citizens in today's world." Who else but teachers will lead the way?

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