



A COLLABORATIVE ONLINE READING AND RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the conception and implementation of reading and research project designed to help students develop effective online reading and research skills. In addition to providing opportunities to practice traditional reading skills such as skimming, scanning, and critical reading, the project aims to help learners gain autonomous strategies for evaluating the credibility of online information. A student-centered, experiential learning approach to instruction framed the design. This required students to do most of the project work online, and involved a blend of face-to-face activity in computer laboratory along with out-of-class online collaboration.

KEYWORDS: *Collaboration, reading, face-to-face learning, online learning, project work online, teaching and learning*

INTRODUCTION

In general English such as Reading and Writing subjects in the Senior High School, the overarching goal is to prepare them for the language demands and cross-cultural challenges of typical undergraduate coursework in English medium post-secondary institutions.

Today, this subjects includes an expectation that faculty and students will use a variety of technologies to support teaching and learning, including internet-based research sources.

TEACHING CONTEXT

The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Program has a four modular structure consisting of four courses at three levels. Each course (Grammar, Reading, Writing, Communication) is normally taught by a different instructor, for five classroom hours each week. The EAP semesters run three times per year, for 13 weeks, with class sizes generally ranging between ten and 18 students. Historically, the majority of students come from Philippines, China, Korea and Japan.

All EAP classrooms have networked computers and data projectors. The majority of students have their own laptop computers with wireless internet access. There is also excellent access to computer laboratory and networked computer stations throughout the campus. Hardware in the laboratory is updated annually and all laboratory have data projectors and whiteboards.

The school supports internet websites as its official online course management system. Advanced level students are

expected to demonstrate a high degree of autonomy when undertaking key tasks such as writing research papers and delivering presentations. In many of these assignments, students use internet-based information for content. The researcher personal observations and evaluations of student work led me to research use of the internet by English as a Second Language (ESL) students, both in general and in my immediate teaching context.

Students in the Advanced Writing course often include internet-based references in their work. Sometimes this information is taken from religiously biased, commercial, or politically motivated websites, where more objectives or neutral evidence was required for the assignment. In one instance, the researcher observed a student who was searching for information on the website. The student believed that she was viewing the official World Health Organization website. She remarked that she had spent around 15 minutes exploring this commercial site before I approached her.

Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) researchers also recognizes that students may require specific guidance on appropriate use of internet-based information to support academic study. For example, Hedge (2020) remarks that problems are increasingly noticed by teachers as students' access information on the internet and that there are no gatekeepers here (on the internet) and users may need to evaluate information carefully. Jarvis (2009), questions whether EAP students are able to appropriate and effective use of internet resources in their academic work. He writes, the notion of equipping learners for academic study raises specific challenges of e-literacy skills for non-native speakers (NNS) of



English and it is by no means clear whether EAP providers are rising to this challenge.

Based on this evidence, the researcher determined that my Advanced level students needed further guidance and preparation if they were to make properly informed decisions about the credibility and applicability of information they were finding on internet web pages. In response, the researcher created the Online Reading and Research project in the Advanced Reading course.

The Advanced Reading course curriculum is based on a core ESL reading text which is used for the length of the course, but the course instructor is free to choose further readings and activities to supplement the text. Key tasks and skills in the course include summarizing, critical reading, reading strategies and reading response. The activities in the project were created with these learning goals in mind.

DESIGN AND RATIONALE

The design of the project was underpinned by the notion that the critical literacy and language skills which support effective online reading and research are probably best developed through student-centered experiential learning.

Experiential learning allows students to explore ideas from their own perspectives, building individual understanding of new ideas and information based on previous experience and knowledge. Many learning theorists reason that the current information-driven environment demands a student-centered, relevant, and engaging approach to teaching, wherein students are equipped with the dynamic skills and autonomous strategies for managing information in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing society.

Based on their study, Levine et. al. (2020) conclude that an online networked reading environment can provide opportunities for authentic reading experiences, and is conducive to the development of critical reading skills.

Laouta (2020) stresses the need for English for Academic Purposes learners to experience the texts that websites provide as part of a strategy to develop real world skills'. In order to build awareness and develop critical literacy skills for reading and researching online, a number of authors recommend having students work through web evaluation experiences recommends a constructivist, learner-centered pedagogical approach to developing critical literacy skills in learners, which can prepare them to work more effectively with constantly changing technology.

Miller et.al. (2020) note that a project-based learning approach 'lend itself to the use of new technologies because students can be encouraged to draw on a range of technological tools in order to research, present and share their projects'.

The researcher strong belief in the potential benefits of integrating technology into the projects, and confidence with the technical aspects of campus resources (networked computer laboratory, data projectors, Moodle) led to a blended learning design.

As determined by the pedagogical aims, the project necessarily involved student use of the internet to search for read, and evaluation web-based information. In addition, the project required groups to post their initial summaries and evaluations on the Moodle forum. According to Garrison and Vaughan (2020), such asynchronous text-based environments can decrease cognitive load and would appear to offer students a considerable advantage in processing information and constructing meaning.

Internet website was already established as an online learning space in the course, serving administrative functions such as scheduling and posting of course grades, and hosting a variety of learning activities including links to interactive reading skill exercises and course vocabulary learning resources materials.

The availability of well-equipped computer laboratory meant that induction and other initial online work could occur in a face-to-face setting during regular classroom hours. Groups could then do the project work outside of regular class time by using the online Moodle forums, which allowed students the flexibility to choose when and where they would contribute to their group project.

THE PROJECT: PREPARATION AND INDUCTION

At the beginning of the Advanced Reading course, the class met face-to-face in the computer laboratory to take part in general induction activities on the internet website, such as navigating the site, accessing site resources, creating forum posts, and hyperlinking in forum posts. Students then regularly used the internet website site to access course resources and activities.

Specific preparation for the collaboration online reading and research project occurred in the third and fourth week and required a total of around five hours of computer lab class time.

Preliminary student-led discussions took place around the students' perceived benefits and pitfalls of internet use for research purposes, experiences and the nature of internet use for research purposes, experience, and the nature of internet searches and reading online, and topic of interest for researching online.

Groups of three students were formed based on shared research interests. When the online work began carefully structured guidance was provided. Links to website evaluation guides were posted on internet websites. The guides and checklist were reviewed with the class and groups used them to evaluate several web pages on the topics of 'immigration' and Martin Luther King. The web pages were pre-selected to provide experiences with both reliable and unreliable information sources and groups were asked to rate the information on each webpage as unreliable, reliable or highly reliable, using the web evaluation tools provided earlier.

Following this exercise, a class discussions allowed learners to reflect on and share their experiences. Next, each



group developed research questions based on their shared interests and conducted an internet search for one article related to their topic. Requirements for the project were introduced at the end of this session.

TRANSITION TO ONLINE COLLABORATION

Groups transitioned to online work, and no further official classroom time for the project was scheduled. However, I did provide regular opportunities for students to ask questions or voice any concerns about the project. Each group was required to post brief summaries of around 150 words and critical webpage evaluations of eight different information sources on the web, related to the group topic/ research questions.

Groups were encouraged to complete full evaluation posts of any unreliable web pages they encountered, since it is in the process of doing so that they were most likely to develop the critical literacy skills needed to evaluate internet-based information sources.

The minimum length of each sourced article was 1,000 words. Groups posted their summary evaluation submissions on the Moodle course forum, and included hyperlinks to the web pages they summarized and evaluated in each post. This allowed for quick user to the web pages under scrutiny.

The first post was considered a 'practice post' and groups received extensive, detailed feedback from me in the form of a public reply on the forum. All class participants were able to see the work of other groups as it was posted and review my feedback posts on the work as well. Students were encouraged to post further comments or questions if desired.

Over the next five weeks, groups posted the remaining seven summary evaluations on the internet websites forum but received private feedback from me. At the end of the semester, each group delivered a ten to fifteen-minute presentation, bringing the online phase of the project back into the classroom. The presentation includes a step-by-step analysis of two of each group's evaluated web pages as they were displayed on-screen for the class, and a reflection on research activities, web page evaluation strategies, and collaborative processes involved in the project. A question and answer session followed each presentation.

DISCUSSION

Internet searches and the summary and evaluation of web pages were the main tasks for this project. Feedback indicated that participants saw the online forums as a logical option for collaboration, and the transition to online work went smoothly.

The content of the web page features evaluation posts revealed that the students were focusing on relevant webpage features to judge reliability. I have used the project in other semesters with some slight modifications based on this feedback, and seen similar results.

The blended design contributed to a positive and meaningful learning experience for the participants, and several

students commented that assessing web pages for credibility was a new activity for them and they found the project useful:

(a) It was a good experience to learn how to evaluate web page. Before we learn it, I have never thought about the credibility of the web pages. For our future study, evaluation is essential. Now, I always think and evaluate web pages before click them. Studying web sites evaluation and practicing critical thinking was very useful and interesting. You gave us a chance to think critically and we achieved it unconsciously.

One student commented that her understanding began to change as she realized the relevance and importance of evaluating web-based information:

(b) Actually, at the beginning I did not know why I was doing the project. However, as the time went by and I started my research paper, I realized how important the skills of determining whether the website I am looking at is credible. The time spent for this project was absolutely worthwhile, for I was able to recognize whether a website can be used for my research paper almost at first look. I am pretty sure that I have gained a good strategy of finding reliable sources on the web.

Open classroom discussions and careful learner preparation in key aspects of the project probably provided motivation and contribution to the project's success. These aspects include induction, relevance of the learning aims, and the rationale for using online forums in the project.

A dry run of the project tasks in a face to face setting was essential. For second language learners working online, a lack of confidence with technology and this in turn can decrease motivation. Experts caution against introducing technology to the learning environment too quickly and recommend sufficient scaffolding and close monitoring of student activity as technology is integrated into classroom activities (Ramachandran, 2020).

Coming into the project, students were already familiar with navigation and features of the Moodle course site. The project design included opportunity for participants to work together on structured tasks in a face to face setting before transitioning to online collaboration. Networked computer laboratories with data projectors provide the best support for this, as students can follow the teacher demonstrated tasks on screen and immediately attempt the tasks on their own computers.

The face-to-face induction sessions provided insight into the kinds of difficulties students might experience while working on the project tasks during the online phase. For examples, students can find it challenging to deal with the overwhelming volume of information that is returned when conducting web searches, and an induction period provides opportunities to discuss effective search strategies before students' tackle web search on their own. In this project, the researcher initially provided links to several different web pages' evaluation templates and asked students to choose the resource that they preferred. However, most students found the choice difficult, and wanted a recommendation instead.



In second experience with the project, the researcher provided more guidance and structure here, making students aware of the different guides available, but recommending the site in particular, based on positive student feedback.

Another motivator for students was probably the researcher effort to make clear links between the blended activities and learning aims, and the students' perceived relevance of those aims. An informal discussion at the start of the project revealed, as expected, that all students in the class regularly searched that internet for information on the internet. Some were quite surprised to be 'tricked' by the unreliable sites in the preparation tasks, and the researcher believe this experience generated interest and motivation to learn.

The online user interface for collaboration was not complex, and user issues were minimal. There were no connectivity issues, or technical difficulties with the internet websites. Some groups turned to additional technologies to facilitate collaboration, and reported using Skype, MSN, and web-based document storage in their work.

Students cited collaboration challenges, including the sharing of workloads and group dynamics, but no students attributed these difficulties to the online mode of work. There were also no concerns about the time required to complete the project, even with the study load of three other Advanced Level EAP courses.

The online phase of the project allowed group members flexibility in time and place of their work. Most importantly, the forums appeared to facilitate learning in important ways, although they were used mainly to display and share student work rather than as interactive discussion boards. The internet websites forums provided public evidence of the project work and teacher feedback, documenting individual and group learning as the projects developed. In turn, students had opportunities to learn from the work of their classmates. Several students commented that seeing the work of other groups on the forums motivated them to work harder to improve their own work. For example, one student wrote:

The researcher think model was good. We can see other groups' work. It motivates us to work harder than them. Furthermore, you can check everyone's work at the same time which was very convenient.

CONCLUSION

Students received course credit for their work in the online reading and research project, based on a topic proposal and the summary evaluation posts. This no doubt contributed to their motivation to work online. But the class discussions and student feedback also indicated that students perceived immediate practical value and relevance in the project and the use of the internet website forums to facilitate the group work.

For this particular EAP project, the use of technology is inextricably linked to the pedagogical aims and learner needs which inform those aims. Within the teaching context, face-to-face classroom time is quite limited and the requires for

effective collaboration work on the project exceeds available classroom instructional hours. A blended design allows for a face-to-face induction period and ongoing instruction support, while providing flexible opportunities for learner reflection and online collaboration.

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