ACCESS TO AN AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: This paper highlights the potential of authentic conversational communication for students of technical universities, with special reference to students of the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj. The paper describes a way for foreign language teachers to set-up and facilitate authentic international communication in EFL classes using a free, hosted weblog tool with a two million-member-strong community of active users and built-in social networking features. The paper also points to the potential that social software has for encouraging greater autonomy and self-direction in foreign language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Most students of the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj, Romania lack access to native speakers for authentic communication, be it speaking or writing. As soon as they leave the classroom, they re-enter a world full of speakers of their own first language, leaving them with little opportunity to use what they have learned. Various approaches to overcoming this problem have led EFL practitioners to design and implement pedagogic strategies incorporating internet based communicative activities, such as the use of keypals, tandem language exchanges, chat, message boards, and discussion forums. Recently, the use of weblogs in the classroom is yet another such approach, one in which students publish their writing and receive comments from outsiders, potentially leading to discussion and further use of the target language.

One of the major difficulties of using weblogs in EFL is lack of participation from readers outside the classroom. Some form of mutual interest must exist between the writer and reader if the latter is to respond in a meaningful way. Simply posting thoughts, journal entries, or homework assignments on a weblog isn't sufficient to generate an immediate and sustained interest for any given reader, nor is it likely that a potentially interested reader would come across the site, given the enormity of activity on the internet. This, therefore, places the time consuming burden of networking on the teacher to find potentially interested readers willing to commit to helping an EFL learner.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Intersolutions's Weblog, ETH Weblog Service or LiveJournal address this problem by offering free weblog hosting services that also facilitate social interaction with members from around the world based on their mutual interests. Learners write and the software helps them find readers and conversational partners with its 'interests', 'friends', and 'community' features. The merger of social networking and blogging creates a 'social semantic web', where content and identity are bundled together. In a microcosmic way, these weblogs may indeed offer a glimpse of the direction in which internet communication at large is evolving. This is excellent news for EFL learners, for it presents them with opportunities to converse...
with people outside the classroom in a meaningful way, putting to use what is learned in class and being exposed to authentic usage of the language. Below are some other advantages to using weblogs in EFL classes:

- Weblogs for learning English host a community of approximately two million active users, 90% of whom are under the age of 25 (Bauer, 2004), making it an ideal peer group of potential conversational partners for EFL learners at the high school and college level.
- After using these weblogs consistently for several weeks, learners will begin to develop a network of friends centered on their own personally defined interests. What emerges is a cluster of unique personal learning communities in the target language, each transcending the traditional, cultural, linguistic, and geographic boundaries of the classroom.
- As ownership belongs to the learners and their online identities are situated in an authentic, flexible, and unpredictable international context, they can experience a degree of power and freedom not normally granted by their institutions of learning. The teacher should act as a monitor and facilitator of the process. Once the semester is finished, most students should have the skills and means to continue blogging, thus encouraging to take control over their own learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In 2006 and 2006 we made the use of weblogs a central component in our foreign language courses for second year university EFL students of Landsurvey, at the University of Agricultural Sciences and veterinary Medicine of Cluj. In addition to working out of a writing textbook and doing face-to-face activities in class, students were required to write weekly on their weblogs. Homework assignments were not only designed to encourage students to put to use what they were learning in class, but also to instill positive and responsible blogging behaviors necessary for success in a text based community of English speakers; such as the importance of linking, commenting, responding to comments, proper source attribution, etc.

Based on our recent experience, what follows is a step-by-step, practical guide for successful implementation of weblogs in EFL classes. It should, of course, be adapted according to the circumstances of each classroom. Also, weekly homework assignments should, in part, serve to drive the development of the stages listed below.

1. Students will need to sign up for their own weblog accounts. Make sure that each student has a personal email account before attempting to sign up. As part of the registration process, the weblog sends out a confirmation email containing a link necessary for activation of the new account. Remind your students that their websites will be available for public viewing and that it is perfectly acceptable for them to use pseudonyms or nicknames when signing up.

2. After registration, require your students to email you their new URLs. That way, you will be able to match screen names and blog titles with actual student names. It is also advisable to create a centralized, tutor weblog with links to all student sites. This can act as an online focal point for the class, where the teacher can make announcements, point students to interesting links for self-study, and highlight student successes with the new medium.
3. Once students have signed up, ask them to immediately select a layout and color scheme for their weblogs. The weblogs provide a generous selection of ready-to-go templates and colors that can be chosen with the click of a mouse. Simple customization is important, for it helps to create a sense of ownership and unique online identity from the very beginning.

4. Students should now practice creating and editing posts on their weblogs. They should also learn how to make comments on other LiveJournal sites and answer comments on their own sites. A good place to practice this is on the weblogs of other classmates. We encouraged students to post and comment frequently. Especially important is for students to understand the importance of answering comments posted on their own pages. By not doing so, conversation cannot develop. Once students demonstrate proficiency in posting, commenting, and editing; they are ready to interact with the native speaking community at large.

5. Setting interests is very important: do an activity, getting them to list their top ten interests in life. Then, have them each go to their 'manage personal info' pages and enter these ten words into the 'Interests' box. Ask them to be specific. For example, instead of listing 'music', they should list the name of a specific artist (Enya), group (Aerosmith), or genre (hip-hop). At this point, students may also wish to upload a small picture to represent themselves during community interaction. Most of our students chose pictures of small animals or cartoon characters.

6. Finding friends is also very important. Students go to their 'User Info' page, find their 'Interests' list, and click on the first word that appears. Weblogs will then reveal a list of communities and other users who have also listed the same word as one of their interests. The students should then follow one of the links and skim the contents on that site, continuing to the same on other sites until an interesting community or person is found. Then, the student should add this person or community to his/her friends list by clicking on the 'add user to friends list' button on the other person's 'user info' page. The student should then comment on one or more of the posts on the new site added. I recommended that my students strive to find two new friends per week.

7. Reading the friends page and responding is the next reasonable step After 'making friends', students should make frequent visits their 'friends' page, which aggregates the postings of all the friends on their list. Reading the friends page eliminates the need of students having to surf from site to site to read what they're new friends have written; it all comes to one page. Students can also make comments directly from the Friends page. Reading the Friends page and responding with comments should become a part of each student's weekly language learning activities. As McGarry (1995, in Benson 2001, p125) argues, working with authentic materials in language learning plays a major role in fostering autonomy in learners by enabling them to match learning opportunities to their needs.

8. The next step is community building. At this point, students should be in midst of reading and writing in an authentic setting. They will be meeting a variety of people; learning new language patterns, idioms, and vocabulary; and striving to understand comments that were posted on their site or things that were written by their new online acquaintances. They might even be so lucky as to receive help from outsiders. From here, it is necessary to teach them the importance of making links in their postings to other users and sources of relevant
information on the internet. Linking is vital for community building and will in turn attract more interest to their sites. Along with learning how and when to link comes the ethical practice of attributing sources properly, which is necessary for building trust amongst readers.

9. Students should be given assignment homework. They should post something weekly, for a quiet page quickly leads to a stagnant one. Scaffold the students' online behavior by designing homework assignments that require putting to use what is studied in class in combination with writing about their own interests. Use your imagination. If more friends are needed, give them the task of finding someone who fits a specific profile. If linking needs to be practiced, have them introduce a new friend on their blog or connect an interest with a source of information on the internet. If correct attribution is to be learned, either have them quote another blogger and write something in response or have them find a controversial article and post their opinion of it. Try to view homework assignments as the key to unlocking the doors of self-access and learner autonomy. Remind them that their weblog belongs to them and that they are free to write anything at anytime. Urge them to post outside of homework assignments, as they would in a free journal.

As the students begin their individual journeys upon the open waters of internet communication, the teacher's job is to step in and help when necessary.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described how large weblog communities with built in social networking features can be used in EFL classes to provide students with a target language community centered around their own personal interests. Such personalization in an authentic conversational environment can motivate students to take more control over their own learning, thus encouraging a move toward greater learner autonomy. Like Illich states, "Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (1970, p56). In the end, they just might have fun doing it, as most of our students did.

REFERENCES

4. Richardson, W., 2004, 'Blogging and RSS--the "what's it?" and "how to" of powerful new Web tools for educators' MultiMedia Internet@Schools 11(1).