A Qualitative Study of Mixed Level Students' Attitudes towards Studying English Discursive Communication with the Use of an Instructional Blog Site.

Neil Addison   Richard Walker

Abstract *This paper examines English students' attitudes towards a web blog that was employed as an instructional tool in order to facilitate and build on study performed in the classroom. Following a selected overview of previous studies into the pedagogical benefits of web blogging, a description of the instructional aims of the researchers' web blogs is outlined. The effectiveness of the research is then assessed with reference to data taken from student response questionnaire data. Recommendations made in light of this data suggest that future research could focus upon ways to improve the effectiveness and presentation of future course web blogs.*

Background

The use of online media within English communication courses has become an established fixture in ELT. Web 2.0 services, including blogs, wikis, social bookmarking applications and social networking sites, have led to new affordances in teaching fields, methods of communication and the creation of knowledge (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007, p. 64). Their popularity has risen in recent years and interested teachers have promoted the use of online activities that extend courses beyond the confines of the classroom. Certainly, here in Japan, teachers have explored ways to use blogs for a variety of educational purposes; one notable example being Stout (2009), whose blended learning approach helped 'alleviate some of the problems posed by mixed ability classes' (p. 256). Other instructors have chosen to use blogs for specific purposes related to their courses with the predominant reason being for interactional purposes. Indeed, one author of this

paper used a blog as a means to promote interaction outside the classroom when teaching a Media English course in 2009 (Walker, 2009) which allowed for a portion of student assessment to be focused on a set number of blog entries. His experience echoed Brescia and Miller's (2006) concerns about online media: although students may write insightful and original pieces, many choose to write perfunctory entries that merely satisfy the requirements of a course. Believing this to be unacceptable, both authors chose to discuss ways to use blogs in a more satisfying manner. Rather than being a tool to promote online participation, we aimed to use blogs as a means to widen the scope of classroom instruction.

It is almost certain that our students will use English online during the course of their lives. The language has long since begun functioning as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2006, p. 339), and globally is increasingly influencing the way people work and interact with one another. Furthermore, two social trends make it likely that our students will use English online in the future: the first is that the number of Internet users in Japan has doubled since 2000 ("Internet World Stats," 2010), and the second is that Japanese firms are acknowledging the need to use English as an official business language ('English necessary', 2010). Due to such developments, it would seem worthwhile to utilize online tools in English language courses). However, unlike Asian students in countries where English has played important historical and institutional roles, namely those in Kachru's (2005) 'outer circle', students in 'expanding circle' Japan still live in an environment where it is not used on a daily basis. Elsewhere it has been used as a 'virtual' language (Widdowson, 2003, p. 48), subjected to 'local constraints and controls', but in Japan, its' relevance has been determined within a nexus of political power and control; the lack of necessity afforded towards its active use has prevented a localized English from developing, with the result that 'inner circle' English norms remain the pre-eminent form of English taught in schools. However, recent pronouncements by leading Japanese companies that English will be an official language of business ('Japanese', 2010), and the announcement of increases in compulsory English classes for public school elementary school students (Fukada, 2010), it appears that English is now being afforded more importance in Japan. With English being the benchmark for global online communication, it makes pedagogical sense to introduce online course components that can be accessed online.

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The class

Our course web blogs were used with a third year English discussion class at a private university in Chiba, Japan. The departmental curriculum focused on the teaching of English discursive techniques and skills: to purposefully teach these skills necessitated the teacher producing topics of conversation for group discussion on a weekly basis. The textbook employed (Kehe and Kehe, 2010) provided short topics in each unit and focused mainly on contextual and technical aspects of such skills, placing the onus on the teacher to provide discussion topics that would provoke desired language use. Both teachers considered this aspect of the class to be crucial in terms of nurturing student interest. However, to add stimulation to the classes, it was decided that alongside conventional supplementary material (i.e. worksheets), short video clips related to the topic would be included. These video clips would be accessible on the blog before and after class time, a decision seen as important when taking the median level and low motivation levels of students into consideration. It was believed that classroom instruction would be complemented by having this class content available on the course blog, and foster stronger knowledge on course topics.

We therefore chose to employ the blog as an instructional tool in recognition of our pedagogical context. Though planned for third year students, fourth year students also elected to take the course. Resultantly approximately 70% of students were third year students, and 30% were fourth year students. Many of these students were more interested in the attainment of a credit than in the topic of 'Academic Speaking'; others, particularly fourth years, were in the midst of applying for jobs with additional time constraints. It was therefore inevitable that students would miss some classes. With this in mind, we felt the employing of a course blog as an interactive, collaborative medium would be counterproductive. Instead, we employed it as an instructional medium to reflect and complement communicative skills and topics studied in the course. It therefore served three key purposes: to help students prepare for class, to help students revise course language and discourse skills, and to help students prepare for course tests. In essence, the blog acted as a twenty-four hour resource used at student discretion.

Rationale

With the central aim of the blog site being instructive, our intention was to make it function in a similar vein to a textbook, or rather an e-textbook. Our

rationale was to achieve consistency between work performed and studied in class, and independent student work through reading and viewing the blog sites outside class time: a kind of blended learning approach, described in 'A Framework for e-Learning: A Blended Solution' (Graham and Valsamidis, 2006, p. 3) as "an educational formation that integrates e-learning techniques including online delivery of materials through web pages, discussion boards and/or email with traditional teaching methods including lectures, in person discussions, seminars, or tutorials".

Where the textbook was not used, class time was utilized by the discussion of topics and issues chosen by the teachers. Both teachers used their online resource site as an aide to help students prepare in-class discussions and activities. It also gave students access to skills taught in class. There have been several claims made on behalf of e-textbooks that they are the instructional format of the future. For example, Cunningham, Duffy and Knuth (2000) claimed, in 'The Textbook of the Future' that traditional textbook design will have to be overhauled to account for the electronic world in which learners find themselves situated. They argue that "we will at last be able to integrate a variety of modalities besides print and static graphics. The poor textbook sitting on our shelves looks a forlorn sort in comparison to the dazzle and wizardry of emerging hypermedia systems" (Cunningham, Duffy, Knuth, 2000, p. 3).

However, at the time of writing, e-textbooks have not yet made a significant impression on the textbook marketplace. In the United States, the National Association of College Stores reported that e-textbooks cost half the price of a new print textbook, but that electronic textbooks represent just two to three percent of total textbook sales (Managing Technology, 2010). Nevertheless, the research paper 'A Campus-Wide E-Textbook Initiative' (Rickman, Holzen, Klute & Tobin, 2009) provided data which illustrated that students at Northwest State Missouri University preferred to use e-textbooks over traditional textbooks when considering convenience in accessing and retrieving information. When asked if e-textbooks were more convenient for accessing and retrieving information, a majority of students (56.25 percent) indicated that e-textbooks significantly outperformed regular physical textbooks (Rickman et all, 2009).

This might well be expected, for students are often more familiar with technology than their parents or teachers. All over the world, students communicate, imbibe, and interact with information in a vastly different way from their parents' generation (Richardson, 2008, p. 5). Richardson claims that

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students spend large chunks of time creatively immersed in web 2.0 technologies, and do so whilst enjoying autonomy from parental control. Despite using "a wide variety of technologies" (2008, p. 5) in their free time, students are then told that they can't use them when they attend school. Instead they are often made to use more old-fashioned tools, such as traditional textbooks. The lack of congruence between the digital world, which acts as their playground, with that of a traditional analogue classroom dynamic is stark. Skills and techniques young students employ when accessing information at home can be rendered redundant at school. It was therefore the intention of the educators involved in this research to provide students with online access to facilitate and build on study performed in the classroom.

Therefore, with these aims in mind, great care was taken in choosing and planning the design and layout of the instructional blog site. We needed a coherent and rigorous approach in order to persuade the students to visit and utilize the site. It was also important to make the general appearance of the blog site attractive and colorful. To this end, images and pictures connected to the lesson topics were uploaded from the internet, and relevant videos and You-Tube links were embedded within our weekly blog entries. Large-type font was also employed in postings and attention was paid to the selection of vocabulary so that it was within the average students' locus of vocabulary range. Therefore, the blog site was predicated in accordance with our two aims: to strike the correct balance between being visually stimulating, but also easily comprehensible.

Application

In order to achieve uniform consistency with the weekly topic-led nature of the class, blog entries were separated into class-by-class topics. These took the form of 'Week 1', 'Week 2', and so forth. Blog entries were posted on a weekly basis, with the intended target of publishing them a few days before class. We therefore intended to allow students to have sufficient time to check entries before class. In practice, however, this was not always possible (see discussion below). Additional supplementary online materials (which included course vocabulary file links) were placed at the top right sidebar on the site, whilst topic links and video links were included beneath it. Students were first informed of the website address in the first week of the semester, and advised on a continual basis that pre class lesson information was freely available for viewing. While doing this, it was stressed that although the website was not a compulsory part of the course, it was advis-

able to view the materials before each class. It was explained that students who were better prepared for the in-class discussions would perform better during the activities, and therefore would probably attain higher grades at the end of the semester.

Our approach can be better exemplified by an examination of specific class details. One teacher's class, for example, focused discussion activities on two subtopics related to animal rights: the wearing of fur and bullfighting (Addison, 2010). The classes were arranged as follows: firstly, students viewed a video clip on one of the two conversation topics. After viewing the clip(s), students were asked to discuss their feelings in small groups and give opinions regarding the topics. Secondly, students were instructed on how to use opinion words and conversational expressions, which aimed to transform the register of their discourse and promote a deeper discussion. Thirdly, following a couple of short exercises on discussion vocabulary, students returned to the two conversation themes of the class. They were given a selection of handouts that contained information that gave arguments both for and against a proposition related to the sub-topics. After reading the data, they were expected to discuss opinions whilst using the provided data and the discussion strategies. For most classes, a version of the data and discussion strategies were available on the web blogs at least one week before the class. The entry was often headed by the video clip (usually from youtube.com) used in class, with data placed within the entry and links to conversational skills that were uploaded onto the Web 2.0 document-sharing website 'Scribd.com'. Students who 'pre-viewed' resources used in the following class were therefore at an advantage over those who did not.

Research Participants

The research participants were sixty students who were enrolled in a brand new discussion elective course for English majors (but open to non majors) at a private Japanese university. Questionnaires were given to participants on the final day of the first semester.

Questionnaire Methodology

We elected to use Likert-style questionnaires: a style which commonly contains five response options, but which has also been used with fewer than two and up to seven responses (Dornyei, 2010, p. 28). This was primarily because we desired a clear choice between positive and negative responses:

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thus, two positive and two negative responses were created. One reason for pursuing this strategy is due to a concern that a choice of five might predispose students to choose a neutral response (Ibid, p. 28). This was felt to be highly probable in the case of Japanese students, who might have reacted, as Chen, Lee, and Stevenson (1995) reported, in a stereotypically Asian way, namely with a stronger tendency to choose the midpoint response. Moreover, our rationale also took into account the fact that providing a considered and accurate response to questions necessitated the application of more cognitive work than when simply choosing neutral responses. We felt that there was a possibility that less motivated participants might choose a "satisfying" strategy" of expending a minimum amount of cognitive processing to answer questionnaire items. This might have resulted in the choosing of a midpoint response. However, an even selection of response choices negated this possibility.

Conditions in which the students filled in the questionnaire

The questions were designed to evoke responses to two main issues: the worth of the textbook and the worth of the teacher's website. Whilst other questions related to different parts of the course were included, three questions were related to the textbook, and three to the website. This was to attempt to judge the effectiveness of an e-textbook against a typical textbook.

We chose to use a Likert-type scale: students were asked to respond by specifying one answer to a question. For each of the eight questions, four response options were given. Students were expected to encircle the response of their choice. Answers were also designed with a Likert-type response scale within which participants were required to give a strong or mild (positive or negative) answer to a question about the textbook or website. An example close-ended question is given below:

Example close-ended question from the questionnaire:
7) How useful was the website in helping you to complete the course?
a) Very useful b) useful c) a little useful d) not useful

In the above example, 'very useful' was assigned a score of 4 points, 'useful' a score of 3, 'a little useful' a score of 2, and 'not useful' a score of 1. Six of the questions were written positively and two negatively, which required us to reverse the scoring system. A participant who chose a 4 point response would score a maximum of 32 points. With 60 participants, the

maximum score for each question was to be 240 points.

However, it should be noted that the response options to question number 6, in relation to the use of the website, were constructed slightly differently to the other questions. This was because the question was predicated specifically on the importance of using the website for improving language phrases. In question 6 students were asked "Why did you usually use the website?"; their four response choices consisting of a) because I wanted to revise language phrases, b) because I wanted to learn more about the topics, c) because I had to prepare for the next class, and d) because I had to practice for the test. It was felt that students selecting (a) or (b) should score higher, as the emphasis was on the voluntary nature of the word 'wanted'. Moreover, the main criterion of our course was for the students to improve their language ability, and therefore our primary goal of employing the website to do this would necessitate awarding response (a) 4 points. Student interest in (b) topics, although seen as important, was secondary to students gaining actual language skills, and would therefore score 3 points. The emphasis on the word 'had' in questions (c) and (d) would see these response options score lower. Students employing the website in a compulsory manner to prepare for the class would score 2 points, whilst students utilizing the website purely as a necessity to prepare for the final test would garner just 1 point.

Questionnaire Conditions

Teacher 1 and teacher 2 gave their questionnaire on the final day of their class. There were small differences in the manner in which the questionnaires were completed: teacher one conducted the questionnaire while the whole class sat together in their usual seating arrangement; teacher two got his students to complete the questionnaire upon completion of an in-class test. In both classes students were asked not to write their names on the paper nor look at their classmates' paper and were instructed to place the papers anonymously in a folder before leaving the classroom at the end of the class.

Findings

In line with our intention to judge the effectiveness of our instructional site against a typical textbook, it was decided that scoring students' attitudes towards each medium in the same questionnaire would give us a useful barometer as to the effectiveness of the site. However, it was assumed that

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Table. 1: Final Mean Ratings of Students' Attitudes towards the Instructional Website.

Textbook Questions:	Mean	SD	Range
What is your opinion of the course textbook? Answer: Okay	3.21	1.032	2
How clear were the instructions in the textbook? Answer: Quite Clear	2.91	1.377	3
What did you think of the discussion strategies from the textbook? Answer: Useful	3.00	1.000	2
Textbook overall rating	3.04	1.136	2

Website Questions:	Mean	SD	Range
How clear and easy was it to understand? Answer: Quite clear	3.1	1.465	2
How useful was the website in helping you to complete the course? Answer: Useful	2.98	1.404	3
Why did you usually use the website? Answer: To practice for the test	1.81	1.517	3
Website overall rating	2.63	1.462	3

Table. 2: Two Additional Student Non Rated Responses.

Question 1: If you didn't use the website why didn't you use it?	Percentage.
I didn't have access to a computer	40%
The information wasn't posted online in time	43%
I wasn't interested in the topics	3%
The blog didn't seem as important as the textbook	13%

Question 2: When would you like the weekly class website information posted online?	
At the start of the semester	8%
A week before class	51%
A day before class	13%
The day after the class	26%

the textbook, as an essential component of the course, would score more highly overall than the non compulsory blog site. Therefore we structured the questions slightly differently to reflect the specific qualities of each medium.

Out of the eight questions in the questionnaire we calculated the ratings for three of the textbook characteristics, and three for the website. Included in

the questionnaire were two further questions related to the website which were not scored. However, the first of these additional questions related to possible reasons for students not using the website, and the second related to their preferences regarding the optimum time of the blog postings. It was felt that this data would be incompatible with the rest of our ratings, but could instead be employed as useful reference material in the discussion and analysis section.

As shown in Table.1 the textbook overall mean rating was a fairly strong 3.04, with a standard deviation of 1.136. This was comprised of individual characteristics such as the students' opinion of the course textbook (mean 3.21), students' attitudes to the clarity of instructions in the textbook (mean 2.91) and students' attitudes to discussion strategies from the textbook (mean 3.00). The overall website mean rating was 2.63 with a higher standard deviation of 1.462. This was comprised of characteristics such as students' attitudes to the clarity of the website (mean 3.1), the usefulness of the website (mean 2.98) and reasons for using the website (mean 1.81). In terms of the individual qualities of the website, it was found that students' attitudes to the clarity of the site rated fairly well. This suggests that despite the students being mixed level the website was comprehensible across the spectrum of the class, fulfilling one of the central aims of the project. In addition, the website was found to be useful. However, the survey found that the primary reason for use was for pre examination revision, as opposed to pre class or post class revision.

Discussion

As expected, the website scored more weakly than the course textbook overall. However, as displayed in Table.1, whilst the textbook discussion strategies were agreed to be useful, with a mean score of 3.00, the website was also rated as useful, with a mean score of a marginally lower 2.98. Whilst the textbook was mandated by the teachers, the website was non compulsory, suggesting that if the website were made a compulsory part of the course it would prove as beneficial to the students as a text. Indeed, in one respect the website did score more highly. As shown in the table, the students agreed that the website was clear and easy to understand. The mean rating for this question was a fairly strong 3.1 against a possible total of 4.0. Whilst the students also agreed that the textbook was clear and easy to understand, it scored a mean rating of 2.91 with a deviation of 1.377. This rating strongly implies that an online instructional medium is a useful component of study for a mixed level class.

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However, just as the results supported some of our research aims, some questions were also raised by the study. Firstly, it should be acknowledged that while the website usefulness mean rated higher than that of the textbook usefulness mean, the standard deviation for the website was a higher 1.404 to a lower 1.000 for the textbook. This illustrates that the website scored highly with some students, and lower with others, perhaps depending on either their English ability, or their familiarity with, or ability to access, computers. However, the textbook, with a lower standard deviation, rated more smoothly with the class as a whole. Indeed, the standard deviation for all the website characteristics was higher than that of the textbook, implying that a typically analogue textbook still retains the ability to service a greater cross section of students. Moreover, many students stated in the questionnaire that they used the website to study for the test (mean 1.81) as opposed to revising language phrases, learning more about topics, or for the following class's preparation. Whilst this suggests that the website was chiefly employed towards the end of the semester by many of the students, it should be observed that this also had the largest deviation of any of the ratings, with just as many students selecting other reasons for visiting the website. Again, this would imply that the frequency of website usage was directly linked to either language ability or computer access.

With the latter in mind, we now examine the data from the two other website centered questions that were excluded from Table.1 but which were included in Table.2. It should be explained that the results of the extra 2 questions (questionnaire questions 7 and 8) were not awarded a mean, SD and range rating, as these questions were more general in approach, and no one particular response option could be argued to score higher than another. Instead, when referring to the results of these responses we will merely state the percentage of students who selected each option. Out of the students who undertook the course, and who participated in the questionnaire, 50% didn't use the course website. When those students were asked why they hadn't used the website (question 7) 40% replied that they didn't have access to a computer. Not having regular access to a computer would prevent students from successfully utilizing the class information and language skills as efficiently as a textbook, and thus undermine to some degree our attempts to analyze the blog as an instructional medium. However, 13% replied that the blog didn't seem as important as the textbook and 3% replied that they weren't interested in the topics. Moreover, 43% replied that the information wasn't posted online in time for the coming class. Whilst great care was taken to ensure that the website information was

updated before each lesson, this wasn't always possible. Therefore, when asked when they would like the website information posted (question 8), 51% selected the option for the information to be posted the week before class. It should therefore be acknowledged that, whilst our study implied that the blog site was perceived as a useful and comprehensible instructional medium, more research does need to be conducted. In particular, this would entail research to measure the worth of using such a site more effectively: improvements are required to ensure that it is updated weekly, and that all students involved in the research are able to access it.

Directions for future research

Textbooks are compulsory, but are mostly used and referred to by students in the lesson itself. Whilst students will consult textbooks outside class for compulsory reasons, such as homework, or test revision, they are rarely employed by students outside of the classroom for general reading purposes. Indeed, research indicates that only 30% of students will perform pre-class reading activities, leaving 70% unprepared to face the class discussion activities mandated by the teacher (Hobson, E, 2004, p. 1). Compliance rates of only 30% could possibly mean that students discovered that they did not need to read their textbook in order to excel in class. Hobson notes that "students turn into consummate pragmatists, determining the minimum reading investment that will produce desired course accomplishment" (Ibid, 2004, p. 3). It is therefore rather optimistic, despite the comparatively attractive merits of a blog site, to expect non compulsory electronic media to be employed by students any differently. Making the website a compulsory part of the class, and giving students access to the blog on campus, such as conducting the lesson at specific times in a computer laboratory, might well ensure a more accurate series of research results. Whilst the website would become a compulsory part of the course, and would therefore necessitate a more accurate definition of a blended learning approach, we would refrain from making it an interactive exercise. Ensuring that the students were spending as much time visiting the website as they were with the textbook would arguably produce a far more consistent and accurate set of results as to the website's worth as an educational medium.

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Authors' Profile
＊ Neil Addison, M.A is a lecturer at Reitaku and Bunkyo Daigakuin Universities. His research interests include language and cross cultural studies, and textbook evaluation and development.
＊ Richard Walker M.Sc is a lecturer at Reitaku and three other universities in the Kanto region. His research interests include discourse analysis and the use of new media to improve course construction.

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The SAP questionnaire:

Please choose one answer from the questions below:

The Course Textbook:

1) *What is your opinion of the course textbook?*
a) boring   b) uninteresting   c) okay   d) interesting

2) *How clear were the instructions in the textbook?*
a) very difficult to understand   b) not very clear   c) quite clear   d) very clear

3) *What did you think of the discussion strategies from the textbook?*
a) very useful   b) useful   c) a little useful   d) not useful

The Course Website:

4) *How clear and easy was it to understand?*
a) very clear   b) quite clear   c) not very clear   d) very difficult to understand

5) *How useful was the website in helping you to complete the course?*
a) very useful   b) useful   c) a little useful   d) not useful

6) *Why did you usually use the website? Choose one answer:*
a) Because I wanted to revise language phrases   b) Because I wanted to learn more about the topics   c) Because I had to prepare for the next class   d) Because I had to practice for the test

Additional Questions:

7) *If you didn't use the website, why didn't you use it?*
a) I didn't have access to a computer.   b) the information wasn't posted online in time.   c) I wasn't interested in the topics   d) the blog didn't seem as important as the textbook.

8) *When would you like the weekly class website information posted online?*
a) at the start of the semester   b) a week before class   c) a day before the class   d) the day after the class