HONING LANGUAGE SKILLS USING BLOGS

By

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in English is a prerequisite for students to bag a place in the on/off campus interviews. Irrespective of the profession, vocation and background the students have to hone their LSRW skills in English. Selection procedures like group discussion and video conferencing are hurdles to students who lack language proficiency in English. All prestigious, science based disciplines at the graduate and postgraduate level such as Computer Science, Engineering, and Medicine seem to be predominantly available only in English. The English proficiency of students educated in the vernacular medium is often deemed insufficient. This has led to a paradigm shift in the teaching/learning of English at the collegiate and higher education level.

Apart from experimenting new teaching methods, teachers are now applying modern technology to support cultivation of language and linguistic skills to foster better achievement at higher education levels. This paper describes blogs as a simple, relatively low-tech, and effective tool to enhance language skills. Blogs are important for technologists, teachers, parents, and researchers who are interested in computer-mediated communication. Physical constraints such as the body, biological sex, race, or age can have a profound effect on self-definition and self-presentation (Collins & Kuczaj, 1991); many of these attributes become flexible in online environments. The anonymity afforded within virtual worlds allows more flexibility in exploring their identity through their language, their role play, and the personae they assume (Calvert, 2002).

The focus of this paper is on the "boon" rather than the "bane" of technology. It presents practical methods for using blogs as a teaching tool for inducing students to communicate without inhibitions. It reports results of a general survey of students in undergraduate courses. This topic is limited to use of blogs as a teaching tool to supplement rather than supplant face-to-face classroom teaching.

Keywords: Language Proficiency, Blogs.

INTRODUCTION

The "global village" has inflated the demand for proficiency in English. Irrespective of their proficiency level and background the students have to hone their LSRW skills in English to bag a place in the on/off campus interviews. Selection procedures like group discussion and video conferencing are hurdles to students who lack language proficiency in English. In real life English and vernacular knowledge their teaching and learning, dominates in classrooms, hallways, canteens, parking lots and interview halls. All prestigious, science based disciplines at the graduate and postgraduate level such as computer science, engineering, and medicine seem to be available only in English. This means that if the English proficiency of students educated in the

vernacular is deemed insufficient at the end of the 12th grade they are denied access to excellence in these prestigious disciplines. This has led to a paradigm shift in the teaching/learning of English at the collegiate and higher education level. Apart from experimenting new teaching methods, teachers are now applying modern technology to support cultivation of language and linguistic skills to foster better achievement at higher education levels.

Blogs are important for technologists, teachers, parents, and researchers who are interested in computer-mediated communication. Physical constraints such as the body, biological sex, race, or age can have a profound effect on self-definition and self-presentation (Collins & Kuczaj, 1991), many of these attributes become

flexible in online environments. In a virtual world, one even gets to construct one's body. The anonymity afforded to youth within virtual worlds allows adolescents more flexibility in exploring their identity through their language, their role play, and the personae they assume (Calvert, 2002).Identity is a central task that begins in infancy and ends with the culmination of one's life.

Students who have been educated through the vernacular medium (Tamil) are unable to define who they are due to the vernacular language divide when they reach the collegiate level. This study was conducted to examine the idea of using blogs to overcome the vernacular divide faced by students. Of particular interest to this study is:

? The manner in which each user exercises his/her language skills.

? How their language shortcomings are overcome.

? How language is used to express emotions and feelings.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses are as follows:

? Students who face the vernacular divide will be more communicative in CMC than classroom interaction.

? Participation in MMC improves communicative competence in English.

? Gender roles can be identified by analyzing language use.

Methodology

To test these hypotheses, a content analysis of selected blogs of common interest was undertaken. The participants were fifty final year undergraduate students of various disciplines who had problems in oral communication sessions. Their discourse, of web log content was analyzed to identify language use and patterns. The students were exposed to active blogging activity. Later they were asked to participate in oral communicative sessions and their performance was judged by the language teacher.

Limitations

The present study was restricted to analysis of content and classroom observation. It has not used any statistical procedures or percentile scores to measure the proficiency of the students. The language used in the blog was used as the only identity for disclosure of personally identifying information, emotive features, sexual identity and semantic themes.

Procedure

The blogs were categorized into primary content areas such as "entertainment blogs," "writing blogs hobbies" etc., which provides an opportunity for the users to track their favorite blogs. The content of the blogs of fifty undergraduate students was taken and subjected to analysis. The content was evaluated in terms of language tone and semantic features. The results cover aspects of online identity and language use for the disclosure of personally identifiable information, emotive features, sexual identity, common blog themes, and masculine and feminine language. Both male and female undergraduates are interested in communicating through blogs.

Findings

The findings were as follows:

? Most of the blog participants were confident enough to reveal their real names, along with other personal information such as course of study or location.

? They feel a certain sense of empowerment in revealing thoughts and feelings without facing an audience.

? Those who lack proficiency in English are able to overcome the psychological barrier that prevents them from voicing their views in oral sessions.

? Their posts appear out of sequence, unlike chatting, face to face, or telephonic conversations. They feel less restricted to express their ideas.

? The data reveals that traditional gender roles seems to influence their communication patterns.

? Male bloggers use a direct and forceful style of language (Excessive use of capitalization) while females use a more indirect and intimate style of interaction.

? In CMC context the use of profane and rude phrases is also common among both male and female bloggers. The anonymity gives them a sense of empowerment.

? The bloggers often introduce their own creative short forms like: "Plz do it 4me","V2 4 a movi estrdai" "meet U tomoro" etc.

? Graphical icons that represent emotions (emoticons), are also used frequently by online communicators.

? Students who were active participants in the blogging sessions displayed better confidence while participating in role play and group discussions.

Usually, there are three basic types of formal classroom discourse: lecture, recitation and discussion to which students are exposed. Students who lack proficiency in spoken skills can be exposed to the use of blogs which acts as a genre by itself will provide them a scaffolding step to proceed from textual to oral proficiency. The practice of blogging if active will enable the blogger to produce regular language expressions that build on top of each other under the same digital roof.It will enable them to obtain a digital voice and identity. This identity marks a developmental milestone. In the classroom language on the internet represents a new type of discourse that is shaped by the creativity and innovation of its users. The study reveals that blogging has resulted in the effective use of English. The internet provides a sense of freedom from embarrassment that student feel when exposed to a class .They are less afraid of the online stranger and feel free and proud to express their views to a global audience.CMC is thus a boon to the language teacher, who can use the blog as a teaching tool.

The language teacher can design a tutor blog at the initial stage of the teaching/learning process. The content of this blog can be limited to the prescribed syllabus and course content. As a part of this assignment the teacher can induce students to share their reflections on fixed topics in the target language. Aaron Campbell's 'The New Tanuki' can be adopted as a model for designing such blogs.

The teacher can also think in terms of a class blog -a shared space, with teacher and students being able to write to the main area. It is best used as a collaborative discussion space. Students can be encouraged to reflect in more depth, in writing, on themes touched upon in class.Barbara Dieu's 'Bee Online' can be taken as a model.

Conclusion

There has been a prominent shift within the field of language learning and teaching over the last twenty years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching. The study shows that we must understand that blogs are a communicative medium. They enable us to bridge the gap between textuality and oral skills. This study is just the tip of the iceberg and leaves plenty of scope for future research and analysis.Encouraging students to participate in blogging sessions will provide them the confidence to participate in face to face conversations.

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