Emerging Communities at BBC Learning English

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of the BBC Learning English [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/] online community, focusing on tools such as e-mail discussion lists, message boards, comments boards, student/teacher blogs, competitions, and voting. It describes how relationships between the intermediate level users of all nationalities and the tools, the website and students with each other, have emerged and developed through the use of each feature at the site. It discusses the different types of community that have emerged around each tool, and how *BBC Learning English* practice has been influenced by the users. The live presentation also included an opportunity to explore "The Flatmates" [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/]*,* an online language learning soap opera, and offered participants an opportunity to write an episode of their own.

Introduction

BBC Learning English was created as a result of re-organisation at the BBC World Service, which has been providing English language instruction since its inception in 1943. The *BBC Learning English* website is free to use and does not require registration; it provides a wide range of language learning resources including audio and video, aimed at learners of all nationalities studying English at the intermediate level and above (see Figure 1). New content is added to the site every weekday. The site is syndicated to a number of partners worldwide: user numbers have increased yearly and currently stand at approximately 1.5-2 million unique users, generating in excess of 30 million page views per month.

Figure 1. Front page of BBC Learning English.

One of the guiding principles of the BBC is that audiences are at the heart of everything we do. User participation is key to the success of the BBC Learning English website. When the site launched in 1996, it was completely text-based with no audio, video, or discussion/comments facilities. However, the increasing ubiquity of Internet and e-mail connection was brought home to us when we received an e-mail from a teacher in Germany, complaining that the *Words in the News* feature (currently at the News English [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/newsenglish/] page) had not been published that day as normal (we were experiencing technical difficulties). This event prompted us to explore the means of establishing communication with our users and enabling them to communicate with us and each other in ways that had hitherto been impossible.

First Steps Towards a Learning Community

We began by setting up e-mail discussions and message boards (see the BBC World Service: Learning English Message Board [http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/mble/]. The role of *BBC Learning English* staff was to guide and moderate discussions, relating them to the content of the main website, but such attempts met with limited success. We discovered that the popularity--and content--of both the e-mail discussions and the message boards, while conducted largely in English, bore very little relation to the content of the main website, nor did it to the contributions of our staff. On the contrary, users seemed determined to dictate the content of these portals to the exclusion of the

hosts. Even when comments were concerned with English language learning, they tended to be of the "please tell me if this sentence is correct" type rather than discussion of the language learning themes being explored on the BBC Learning English website. There was little evidence that the message boards drive significant numbers of users through to our main site, where the bulk of our materials are located.

We accepted that the popularity of the message boards had little to do with our input and decided to let the community develop on its own, scaling back our role to that of moderator and occasional contributor. In fact the boards' popularity (up to 1,000 messages per day are posted) meant that we did not have the human or financial resources to participate more than minimally. The technology used to facilitate the e-mail discussion group was cumbersome and resource-heavy and this service was eliminated in 2006, while the message boards continued to receive heavy traffic until they were closed to new postings in December of 2007.

We were forced to search for a more manageable way of establishing a learning community that would have BBC Learning English as a focal point rather than just a provider. As blogs began to proliferate on the Internet, we thought long and hard about ways to exploit this new technology to its fullest potential in the *BBC Learning English* context to build a vibrant and focused community around blogging tools in a way that had thus far eluded us.

We settled on the idea of a rotating student-teacher blogging relationship (currently hosted at the Learning English Blog [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/communicate/blog/] page). A *BBC Learning English* user, selected by means of a simple e-mail competition, would have a blog space to which s/he would post regularly. The language and content of the student blog would be responded to by a teacher blogger; other users would be able to post comments on both the student and teacher blogs. The student blogger is changed every month; the teacher blogger every two months.

The result has been the emergence of a focused and tightly-knit but welcoming community of BBC Learning English users. The teacher-student blogging relationship seems an ideal medium for the expression of individual personalities and the achievement of a fun and friendly context in which to explore language. Alex Gooch, the teacher blogger in April 2007 (whose picture appears with these quoted posts), wrote:

Hello Ana Paula, and hello everyone out there.

*My name is Alex, and as of today I'm **taking over from** Samantha as the new teacher blogger. Look at the top of this page* [see photo above]*, and you'll see a*

*photo of an **incredibly** handsome man – that's me!*

Later he wrote:

'Incredibly' *means 'very very', or 'extremely'. 'Incredibly handsome' means 'so handsome that I'm amazed, I can't believe how good-looking this guy is'. I think that describes me quite well, don't you?*

He received several good-natured comments in response:

How lovely to see such a handsome man, and at the same time he told us that he thinks himself he is gorgeous man...

[posted by Abdisamad, Somalia from Cairo, Egypt]

I'm very happy to read your blog. Your words are as funny as your face. Nice to see you, my teacher on line!

[posted by VanThu Nguyen from Viet Nam]

Hi,Alex You started your fist blog with showing your handsome face off.I wonder what makes you SOOOOOOOOO confident of your face.When I asked my son,who is five,whether your face is handsome or not he shook his head, stared at your picture for a while and said he was far better than you...

[posted by hyoshil from lincoln]

And the student blogger, Ana Paula, joined in the fun:

Well, handsome man? Where is he? Where is he? Ah... it?s you... I can see now! (I?m kidding) [:)].

To which Alex responded:

One more thing. Some of you mentioned that the man in the picture at the top of your screen DIDN'T look incredibly handsome. Please look again. If you STILL can't see an incredibly handsome man, I think you probably have a problem with your computer. Or maybe a problem with your eyes.

All the best,

Alex

Within this non-threatening context, language exploration is initiated and developed by all members of the blogging community. This from Alex's blog:

Before I go, I'd like to respond to some comments and questions from my last blog. Monica from Brazil asked if my 'weird' surname (Gooch) is English. Actually, Monica, it's Welsh. I'm sorry to say that I know almost nothing about the Welsh language, but I believe 'Gooch' comes from the Welsh word 'goch,' meaning 'red.'

Sevinç from Turkey asked about the following sentence:

"If someone is good-natured, they have a nice personality."

Sevin? correctly noticed that 'someone' is singular, and 'they' is plural, and asked why. In fact, I could have written the sentence like this:

"If someone is good-natured, he or she has a nice personality."

Each posting by student and teacher bloggers receives up to 50 comments, each of which is moderated before posting and must adhere to BBC Learning English house rules [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/communicate/blog/blog_rules This process is manageable at current activity levels.

Comments boards

The Flatmates

Comments boards are a vital part of the BBC Learning English user community: Many students who comment on the student-teacher blogs also comment in other areas. "The Flatmates" is the *BBC Learning English* online language learning soap opera (see Figure 2). It features four young adult characters who share an apartment in London: a new episode is published weekly and receives around one million page hits per month. It features about 130 words of dialogue, with exploration of a language point (see the Archive: Language Point [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/archivelanguagepoi that occurs in the text, and a language practice activity (usually a quiz; see the Archive: Quizzes [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/archivequiz.shtml]]).

Figure 2. Front page of "The Flatmates"<

The Flatmates encourages interactivity and audience participation in a number of ways. Each episode features an audience vote (*You decide*), a *Talk About the Flatmates* page (where students write to a specific question posed about an episode), and an interactive quiz. The audience vote may have to do with plot, character motivation, or language. Between 3,000 and 4,500 votes are cast each week. The *Talk About the Flatmates* feature consists of two or three prompt questions, related to the topic of the current episode, to which learners can post comments in reply. The prompt questions are designed to facilitate personalisation and extension of topics raised in each episode as well as comment on the actions and feelings of the characters. For example, the following prompt questions are related to Episode 71 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/episode71/] in which Alice found out that her boyfriend Paul was separated from his wife and had two children:

Are marriage break-ups common in your country?
Why do you think that is?
What should Alice do now?

The comments below are typical of the more than one hundred we received in response to these prompts:

Sogdiana, Uzbekistan:

Nowdays we are a free state and marriage breakups are very common in Tashkent . They happen because we have become an independent nation and we do not depend upon our parent's opinion or somebody else's. Women work hard to earn money and they cannot rely on their husbands. as it was before. I think if Alice loves him she will not be rebuking him and remain with him

Anny, Taiwan:
marriage breakups actually common in my country. women have more choice now. they can life the way they want. i think alice has to leave paul to find her mr. right, cause she can't break someone's marriage.

Paulo, Brazil:
Marriage breakups are a bit common here in my country. I think that most of them happen when the couple is to much young to go on thought the problems among then. Alice should know more about Paul's past and don't care to much about it cause what metters is the present.

Users often incorporate vocabulary and structures from the episode into their comments; they offer opinions, comments, anecdotes and advice to each other as well as to the characters from "The Flatmates." Between 80 and 200 comments are posted each week from all over the world; they are moderated according to BBC editorial policy and uploaded to the website on a daily basis.

Grammar Challenge

BBC Learning English adapts its use of comments boards in response to the needs of the community, as well as the constraints and requirements of individual programme formats. Thus, while 80-200 comments are uploaded to "The Flatmates" area every week, only five (out of up to 400) comments are uploaded to each episode of Grammar Challenge [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/grammar_challenge a six-minute student-centred audio programme in which learners are challenged to produce accurate grammatical structures (see Figure 3). The student is first presented with a grammar point (for example, question tags) via a short audio text. This is followed by a brief explanation of the grammatical form, after which the student is presented with a grammar "challenge"--most often, the challenge takes the form of prompts to which the student has to respond in writing. The student is guided and supported by the programme presenter. Online listeners to the programme have access to grammar tables and controlled practice activities as well as a space for language production. The audio, grammar explanation, and practice activities are all downloadable.

Figure 3. Figure 3. Grammar Challenge

The comments area of *Grammar Challenge*, titled *Use the Grammar,* has prompt questions, but they differ significantly from those featured in "The Flatmates" in that they provide a context for production of target language. For example, in the *Grammar Challenge* that focuses on question tags (see Use the Grammar: Question Tags - form [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/173_grammarc learners are presented with a dialogue and asked to continue it, using the target language:

Now is your chance to use this week's grammar! Try continuing the following dialogue using question tags. We'll publish our favourite five entries.

Mary: *Hey John, how are you? I haven't seen you for ages!*
John: *I know. Time just flies, doesn't it?*
Mary: *You've got a new job, haven't you?*

The *Grammar Challenge* comments board has proved to be an extremely popular area of the site. It allows learners not only to produce language as the result of the learning journey presented by *Grammar Challenge*, but also to share

their product with the emergent *Grammar Challenge* community. Limited resources and the decision to provide individualised feedback for published comments means that it is possible to publish only five comments with feedback for each episode. However this does not seem to deter users from posting comments: for the first programme, 120 comments were received, rising to over 400 for the fourth programme. This high participation rate (higher than any other comments board on BBC Learning English) is interesting: Elsewhere on the site, almost all comments are published as a matter of routine. It may be that students see the fact that only five comments are published as something of a challenge. Alternatively they may be keen to get feedback for their productive output; or it may be because many of them are regular contributors to other areas of the BBC Learning English website. Two examples of student comments and teacher feedback (in response to the question tags prompts above) are presented here:

1. Gabriella, Switzerland:

John: Yes, I'm really lucky after searching for such a long time, aren't I?

Mary: What about the girl living above my flat, who works in your office too? She certainly would help you if you face some problems, wouldn't she?

John: Yes, for sure. She's really nice isn't she? Well, let's talk about your holiday plans for this year, shall we? (shan't we?)

Catherine says:

*Thanks for your dialogue, Gabriella, it's lovely! The question tag for **let's** is **shall we?** so you can delete (shan't we) - your first attempt was correct! Well done Gabriella!*

Catherine

2. Jorge, Chile:
John: Yes I have a new one; at last I have found what I have been expecting for so long.
Mary: Good, now you feel very happy, dont' you?
John: Of course I do. I'd like you to come to know my new work place. I'm sure you would love to come, wouldn't you?
Mary: Yeah, but surely you're not allowed to receive guests, are you?
John: don't worry, my boss is a nice guy, isn't he?
Mary: I guess

Catherine says:
Thanks for your dialogue, Jorge! All your question tags are grammatically correct, but we need to check apostrophe position in this one:

Mary: Good, now you feel very happy, **dont'** you?

*An apostrophe is used to show a missing letter. **'don't'** means **'do not'** - but the 2 words are put together - **donot** - and the **'o'** of **'not'** is replaced with an*

*apostrophe to make **'don't'.** So your sentence should read:*

Mary: Good, now you feel very happy, **don't** you?

Well done, Jorge!
Catherine

Communication

The BBC Learning English community is reinforced beyond the blogs and
comments pages. Learners are at the forefront in many programmes. For
example, *Grammar Challenge* and *Talk about English* (see the *Talk about
English* webcast Archive) feature real learners and are recorded on location in
language schools; in addition, there is a Meet the team
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1012_LEteam/
page on which learners can find out about the *BBC Learning English* staff:
Learners can (and frequently do) use the *Contact us* page to e-mail us. Learner
of the Week [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/communicate/]
is a permanent link on the *BBC Learning English* homepage. There is a dedicated
area of the site where many of these features are gathered together: This area is
entitled *Communicate* and is central to the continued success of BBC Learning
English (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The *Communicate* page at *BBC Learning English*

Conclusion

BBC Learning English has provided opportunities for user participation and online community building since its launch in 1996. These opportunities take several forms and have developed and evolved to meet the needs of our learners as well as responding to technical limitations and new developments over the past ten years. Comments boards and student-teacher blogs are examples of the way in which we use new technologies to uphold the BBC core value of keeping the audience at the heart of everything we do. We are currently investigating ways of using new technologies for uploading user-generated audio and video content, as well as establishing a presence in non-BBC areas such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Second Life*, in order to keep our learning community fresh and dynamic.

About the Authors

Catherine Chapman has a BA in Communication Studies, CTEFLA, DELTA and M.Ed. in Educational Technology and English Language Teaching with Manchester University (UK). She has taught EFL, EAP and IT skills in several countries, worked in ELT management and has developed web-based ELT/EAP materials projects in institutions including Istanbul Technical University (Turkey) and Newcastle University (UK). She works as an ELT Writer for BBC Learning English.

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A recording of this presentation at the WiAOC may be seen at [http://home.learningtimes.net/learningtimes?go=1563011].