

Collaborative Spaces on the Web and Language Teaching: Blogs and Wikis

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Introduction

This paper investigates how web-based technology is used with particular reference to collaborative spaces on the Internet, for teaching English language in the context of second language learners. After an initial overview of how web-based resources work favourably for ESL learners and teachers, the paper describes the role of collaborative spaces, particularly the blogs and the wikis, in teaching English in non-native contexts. The paper also provides samples of blogs, wikis and some activities that a teacher may use. The paper concludes with an optimistic note on the possibility of creative use of web-based applications in the English language classrooms in India. However, this can be done only if certain positive steps are taken to train teachers in using these applications and also to integrate technology in the curriculum. Also, there is no reason to believe that what works for English would not also work for other languages.

Web-based programmes and the English Language classroom

Web-based programmes facilitate a range of communication channels that come together to shape dynamic texts as pedagogical materials, and also promote a language learning environment. In addition to this, the use of web-based programmes for education promises a unique non-threatening learning environment that motivates learners to participate in these programmes without feeling inadequate in any way as they are not subject to the fear of being

exposed before their peers. These programmes also help learners to work collectively in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level, which helps them to remain energetic and lively. Educators such as Stevick (1976), Littlewood (1981) and Rivers (1992) emphasize the importance of creating a non-threatening classroom atmosphere for learners so that they feel comfortable enough to interact willingly with other learners in the target language. Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith (1999) attest that appropriate use of computer assisted language learning in the classroom can help to create “optimal conditions for language learning environments”. Jonassen (1999) also argues in favour of technology to keep students active, constructive, and collaborative.

Collaboration

Language is a social phenomenon and people use language in different situations, independent of the group they are affiliated with. From a small thing such as doing home work, to presenting an argument in a court of law, it is the individual who uses the language. Therefore the best explanation of collaborative tasks is how individuals collectively perform a task while also performing the individual roles assigned to them by the task master. Collaboration does not imply arriving at a consensus, nor is it synonymous with teamwork. It is more about interaction among participants while doing a task together. Collaborative tasks aim at developing collaborative skills, while also maintaining the individuality of learners wherein

they think as individuals without forgetting that they belong to a group. Therefore they become a part of a 'learning network' (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995) that may be seen as a social process that develops through communication. The focus, in collaborative learning, makes a shift from a mere teacher-student interaction to the role of peer relationships (Johnson, 1981), and implies a learner-centred instruction. This also has implications for the classroom teaching. The teacher has to take upon himself/herself the role of a facilitator in the process of knowledge construction, instead of simply transferring information from his own reservoir of knowledge to that of the students.

Collaborative activities such as seminar presentations and discussions, negotiations, group projects, simulation and role-playing, collaborative essay writing, etc., encourage a many-way participative environment. Various studies have emphasized the use of collaborative learning strategies for better student involvement with the course (Hiltz, 1994), and more commitment and involvement with the learning process (Harasim, 1990). Collaborative learning methods are also perceived as more effective in promoting student learning and achievement (Johnson, 1981). Though collaborative activities are possible both with and without using computer technology, technology-mediated activities are far more enjoyable and exciting than traditional methods, especially for learners who have grown up with computers. In connection with e-learning, it has been said, the 'e' should be interpreted to mean exciting, energetic, emotional and educational, enthusiastic, emotional, in addition to 'electronic', which is the traditional interpretation.

Collaborative online spaces

Collaborative spaces are electronic spaces on the Internet that are 'associated with web applications to facilitate interactive information sharing and collaboration on the World Wide Web'. If used in education, they encourage a virtual learning environment that promotes learner participation, and place an increased emphasis on social learning and the use of social software such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and virtual worlds' as they are not author-controlled. Collaboration, being an important step to the process of learning, it is significant to recognize the utility of cyberspaces such as Twitter, Facebook, Skype, Blogger, YouTube, etc., in language teaching. These spaces encourage users to share audios, videos, pictures and texts either through hyperlinks or by uploading self-designed content. The teacher befriends the learners through the social network, and together they comment on, tag, blog, or even edit the content created. A history or a log of the online activity is maintained in cyberspace, through which the learner can trace his/her progress. The teacher and the learner now chat together while doing a real task in an authentic learning environment. Geography teachers can take their learners on virtual field trips within seconds through use of Google Earth street view. Science teachers can use readymade software to teach various science concepts. Language teachers can use various websites and audio/video files for practice in language skills. Using synchronous tasks in the virtual learning environment ensures that learners, whether local or across the globe, are able to access the classroom at the same time. Technology also helps in instant exchange of ideas through text chat, video and audio chat, or even through email. And through use of asynchronous tasks, teachers enable the learners to access their classrooms anytime and

anywhere using the emailing facility. Using such tools and innovative ideas in the classroom would at the very least, bring a "motivated excitement to the class as the distance that many a time separates the teacher and the taught gets reduced". (Lunyal, 2010, p. 23)

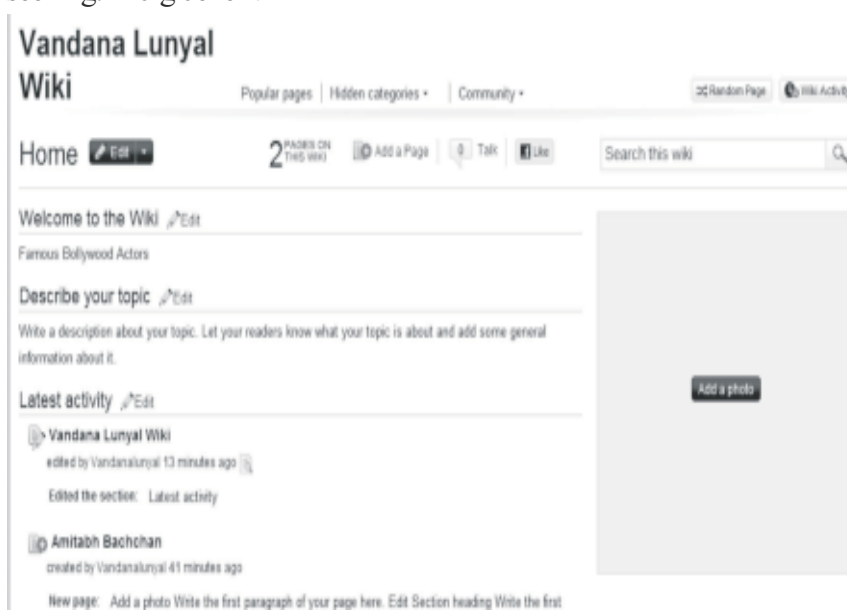
Wikis and Blogs

Blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and image and video sharing sites have become very popular with people. These tools can be used to encourage specific objectives of self-regulated learning that include setting a goal, self-monitoring and help-seeking. A big benefit of working with wikis and blogs for language learning and process writing is that learners, while working towards the final draft, are able to retain all the rough drafts. This helps the learners to measure their progress which in itself is an invaluable learning experience. Besides, the teacher is also able to chart the progress of the learners by looking at the rough versions of the document. Goodwin-Jones (2003) asserts that students actively create information and develop a sense of ownership of the virtual space where they publish their work.

Wikis

A Wiki is an online collection of pages that permits the site users to easily create, edit, link, and even track changes to selected pages on the web. Wikis have a versioning capability

which allows the author to retrieve older versions of the content. Dudeney (2000) describes it a "tool, allowing multiple users to add pages to a website without any specialized [HTML] knowledge" (p. 127). Wikis are tools in the hands of educators to 'promote student collaborative learning' (Richardson, 2006). They are highly collaborative, with a loosely structured set of pages linked in multiple ways to each other and to the web resources. They have an open-editing system as they allow anyone to edit any page. The open-editing and review structure of wikis makes them a suitable collaborative tool to support writing (Parker



& Chao, 2007)

A sample wiki

Wiki-based sample language activities

Activity 1: A Class Wiki For Classes 9 and 10

Read **Amitabh Bachchan's blogs dated 11 and 12 February 2011** at <http://bigb.bigadda.com/>.

You will do the following task in groups.

Get into two groups. Both groups will read the blog.

Group A 1. Write a summary of the blogs in your own language. 2. Make a list of everything Amitabh did on these two days.	Group B 1. Edit the language of the summary. 2. Change some of the words used by Group A.
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For this you will:

- a. Click on ‘**Start a wiki**’ and give your wiki a **name**.
- b. **Group A** will do the assigned tasks.
- c. **Group B** will read the summary (written by Group A)
- d. **Group B** will make the required changes.
- e. **Group A** will go back to the changes made to check whether the changes make it a better piece of writing and re-edit it to make it as flawless as possible.
- f. For feedback send me a link to your wiki at vandanalunyal@hotmail.com

Teaching through Wikis

As we can see in the above activity, wikis can be used to engage learners in collaborative tasks that may require them to create edit and manage content, as well as get teacher and peer feedback. Such wikis particularly encourage reading and process writing skills due to their multi-user capability, versioning feature and simple creation. Such activities can be both synchronous and asynchronous, and can also involve learners from different classes, schools, cities, or even countries.

Teachers can design global synchronous projects where learners at different locations can simultaneously build a page on a predefined topic by adding their knowledge to the page, e.g. a story page can be created by learners of different cultures. A story can be posted on a wiki page and the readers (learners) can be

assigned the task of reading the story and adding a page by posting a similar story from their culture. Another task for learners could be to edit the stories, according to predefined guidelines, and add a page to the wiki by posting their version of the story. Hence, wikis help learners to publish their work on the Internet, which motivates them to write for

real people rather than writing for evaluation by a teacher. Synchronizing the task helps the teacher/author to give his/her feedback collectively by simply adding another page to the wiki. On this page some common problems can be addressed after doing the editing on the individual pages. For asynchronous tasks, students may be notified through email and they may access and perform the task at their own convenience and at their own pace. A password protected page describing some famous people, but with deliberate errors of facts or language can be designed for learners of the group to keep editing until the page becomes factually and linguistically correct. Such activities not only increase their general awareness but also improve their overall language skills. Besides the language skills, learners also get to practice first-hand, the skill of developing an argument, negotiation, discussion and understanding real life situations.

Given below is a wiki activity (activity 2) to help students work in a group together. It will also give them an opportunity to search the web for the required information. Each learner in the group will have a specific role of finding information on given points even though their task will be to create a wiki together. After creating a wiki, different groups will be required to go over each slot and make changes or add to the given information. The task becomes highly collaborative and promotes reading and writing skills.

Activity 2: Creating a Wiki

The tutor will create a wiki on the topic ‘Places to travel in my country’.

The wiki will be divided in six slots.

Class will be divided in 6 groups. Each group will be given the name of a place.

<p>Agra</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where to stay ○ Where to stay ○ How to reach there ○ Things to buy ○ Places to see ○ Pictures of places ○ Additional information 	<p>Lucknow</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where to stay ○ Where to stay ○ How to reach there ○ Things to buy ○ Places to see ○ Pictures of places ○ Additional information 	<p>Mumbai</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where to stay ○ Where to stay ○ How to reach there ○ Things to buy ○ Places to see ○ Pictures of places ○ Additional information
<p>Har idwar</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where to stay ○ Where to stay ○ How to reach there ○ Things to buy ○ Places to see ○ Pictures of places ○ Additional information 	<p>Chandigarh</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where to stay ○ Where to stay ○ How to reach there ○ Things to buy ○ Places to see ○ Pictures of places ○ Additional information 	<p>Thiruvananthapuram</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where to stay ○ Where to stay ○ How to reach there ○ Things to buy ○ Places to see ○ Pictures of places ○ Additional information

Directions to the groups.

Provide the required information under each slot.

You may go to www.makemytrip.com for information.

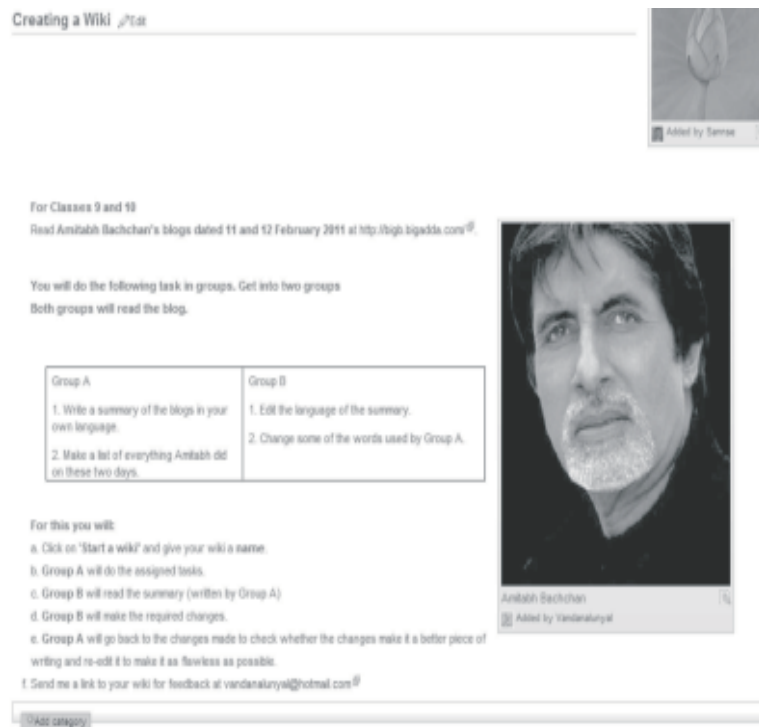
Go over to each slot after completing yours.

Add to the information under the slot ‘additional information. When the Wiki is ready send the link to me at vandalunyal@hotmail.com

Blogs

Blogs are categorized as social software since they establish a connection between the blogs, the blog writers and the

Creating a Wiki



For Classes 9 and 10
Read Amitabh Bachchan's blogs dated 11 and 12 February 2011 at <http://high.bigada.com>

You will do the following task in groups. Get into two groups
Both groups will read the blog.

<p>Group A</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write a summary of the blogs in your own language. 2. Make a list of everything Amitabh did on these two days. 	<p>Group B</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Edit the language of the summary. 2. Change some of the words used by Group A.
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For this you will:

- a. Click on 'Start a wiki' and give your wiki a name.
- b. Group A will do the assigned tasks.
- c. Group B will read the summary (written by Group A)
- d. Group B will make the required changes.
- e. Group A will go back to the changes made to check whether the changes make it a better piece of writing and re-edit it to make it as flawless as possible.
- f. Send me a link to your wiki for feedback at vandalunyal@hotmail.com

ADD category

readers. The possibility of sending messages or posting comments on the bloggers' page makes it social networking site. Weblogs are amongst the most interest-generating, democratic and collaborative sites that encourage people to air their opinion about anything they feel strongly about without getting intimidated by the other people sharing the platform. Basically, weblogs are online journals that people keep, to maintain a record of what they write. Creative writers often upload their poems, stories and articles to share with the world. Practicing teachers can also think of various possibilities of using blogs, such as creating a class blog, or encouraging students to have their own blogs (student blog), or creating an open to all tutor blog on which the student can post content for learners to read, listen, watch and comment. This encourages the students to be more analytical in their thinking as blogging is similar to presenting and defending an argument

A blog-based sample language activity

For classes +1 and + 2

Assumption: All students have their own individual blogs which they use to do group blogging when required.

Get into 4 groups and do the tasks assigned to your group. Every student must read Amitabh Bachchan's blogs dated 11 and 12 February 2011 at <http://bigb.bigadda.com/>.

Group 1
Step1
 Select the 11 Feb 2011 blog and, copy- paste it on a word document.
Step 2
 Using the 'highlight' option in the word file, highlight all the new words in yellow.
Step 3
 Send file to me at vandalunyal@hotmail.com

Group 2
Step1
 Look at the highlighted words. (done by Group 1)
 Right click keeping the cursor on the word.
 Go to synonyms and click on a synonym and replace.
 Take care that the meaning of the original text does not change. Keep the words highlighted.
Step 2 Send file to me at vandalunyal@hotmail.com

Group 3
Step1
 Look at the highlighted words. (done by Group 2)
Step 2
 Use some of the highlighted words to write a paragraph on 'A Day in My life' in your blog.
Step 3
 Send me the link at vandalunyal@hotmail.com

Group 4
Step1
 Read the blog created by Group 3 and write your comments. Each member will write about something similar that may have happened in his/her life.
Step 2
 Send the link to me at vandalunyal@hotmail.com

For this

- a. Group 3 will click on 'Start a blog' and give a name to it.
- b. All the groups will read Amitabh's Blog and then go on to do the activities assigned to them.
- c. Group 3 will write an essay on the blog and when it is done, click on 'publish'.
- d. All the groups will do the activities assigned to them.

Speaking Activity (Next Day)/

Class Discussion on 'How different are the lives of celebrities from ours?'

Presentation

Class to be divided in 4 groups. They will make presentation of five slides on the topic given above.

Steps for the task

Select a celebrity of your choice

Search Wikipedia

Select relevant information

Design the presentation

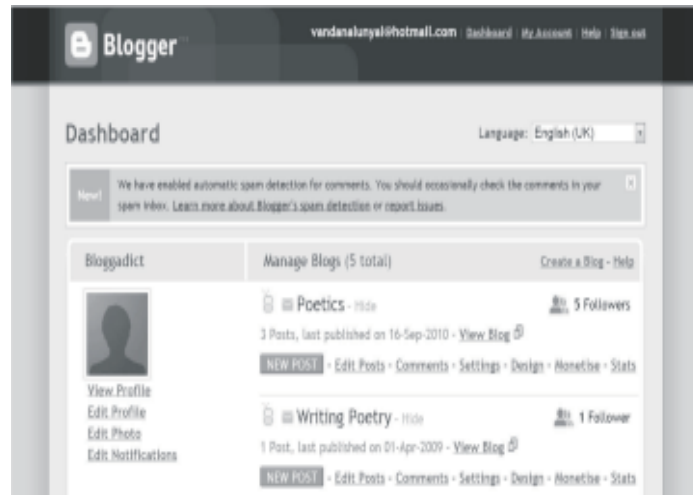
You will have to give the presentation on _____

Teaching Language through Blogs

Blogs, like wikis, encourage enhancement of all language skills. Apparently, blogs promote reading and writing skills. Technology has even made it possible to import and embed audio and video files and even hyperlinks to some important resources for learners in the blogs. However, such resources need to be evaluated for their appropriateness of content before being used. Looking at the blog-based sample language activity given above, it may be said that appropriate blogs can spark off excellent asynchronous activities as they can be accessed anytime and anywhere, by both local and global learners. What is really interesting in a blog is the possibility of having many threads. In the above activity, there is a possibility of starting a forum discussion on the given topic with the help of the 'comment' feature. This allows the learners to share their thoughts on a topic they might find interesting, in addition to the practicing their writing skills. On a single blog a teacher can create different pages posting activities on different topics for learners of different abilities, age, class and interest. For example, to promote reading and writing, a teacher can post a film review of a forthcoming film with a hyperlink to a YouTube promotional video of the film. Learners could go through the review, watch the video and write their comments on whether they agree with the viewer or not, stating their reasons. To promote listening and speaking, the teacher can embed a news video, or a podcast that the students can listen to, and then give their views on a similar topic individually, or in a group. This speaking activity can be recorded as their podcast and the audio file thus created can be sent to the teacher for

feedback. Such real activities will not only improve their language and computer skills, but also teach the students to work collaboratively in a team.

A sample Blog



The role of a teacher

Learning through technology with an imaginative and motivated teacher, who has some training in the methodology of teaching, can be very exciting and useful; and blogs and wikis, in particular, become a flexible platform for collaborative work. A teacher with an orientation in ELT would try and strike a balance between the selection of tools and the methods to be used. Giving a free reign to technology that usually tends to get out of hand in the classroom without the intervention of the teacher may not be advisable, as it poses a danger for learner, of drifting away from the purpose. The teacher needs to switch between the roles of a facilitator and a moderator, and expose the learners to the positives of technology; and as a monitor, to steer them away from its negatives. Monitoring the appropriateness of content can be an issue where the teacher's role can be very significant. Basically, as against the traditional role of a

deliverer of information, the teacher needs to assume multiple roles in a technology supported learning environment. He/she needs to be a leader – to be able to lead learners from one activity to the other without getting diverted; a questioner – to be able to keep learners attentive to what is being done in the class and to ascertain whether they are achieving the intended goals; a soothsayer who can predict problems that may occur in such an environment; and a troubleshooter - to be able to plan well for the class in order to troubleshoot all the problems that are associated with technology and be ready with a back-up plan.

Conclusion

Through the use of technology, classrooms are no longer restricted to the confines of a building, and learning material is not limited to textbook chapters. Technology offers many innovative ideas to teachers to experiment with, and may be looked upon as an enabling tool for both teachers and learners through use of which they are able to perform better. However, we cannot ignore the other side of the picture. A reality that is important to consider is that locating or creating such resources can be a time-consuming process but at the same time once created, these resources can be used for a long time - teachers can save them and use them for different purposes even after the task is over. In addition to this, teachers can easily harness the ubiquity of technology to the advantage of the learners wherein the teacher simulates reality with the help of web-based programmes, and the learners are able to experience the real world challenges of life. Facing near-real challenges with the help of a medium they find interesting can bring a positive change in the attitude of learners. Yet another concern is that collective projects have the risk

of having collective biases on an issue, but at the same time it also draws out the collective wisdom of the group as a whole, which is a positive point and also one of the objectives of collaborative tasks. However, teachers are usually mistrustful of using such resources in a pedagogical setting. It may therefore be a good idea that use of such resources becomes integral to the curriculum as it will encourage teachers to be confident about using these resources legitimately, and enable them to meet the ever-increasing expectations and ever-changing needs of the learners.

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Edward Spear said: "When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam". Actually, the people whose linguistic abilities are most badly underestimated are right here in our society. Linguists repeatedly run up against the myth that working-class people and the less educated members of the middle class speak a simpler or coarser language. This is a pernicious illusion arising from the effortlessness of conversation. Ordinary speech, like colour vision or walking, is a paradigm of engineering excellence – a technology that works so well that the user takes its outcome for granted, unaware of the complicated machinery hidden behind the panels. Behind such simple sentences as *Where did he go?* and *The guy I met killed himself*, used automatically by any English speaker, are dozens of subroutines that arrange the words to express the meaning.

(From *The Language Instinct* 1954/1995, Harper Collins, New York, p. 28)

Do children learn through imitation?

Child: Want other one spoon, Daddy.
 Father: You mean, you want the other spoon
 Child: Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.
 Father: Can you say "the other spoon".
 Child: Other ... one ... spoon.
 Father: Say "other".
 Child: Other.
 Father: spoon
 Child: Spoon.
 Father: "Other spoon".
 Child: Other ... spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

(Braine, 1971)