



TEACHING ENGLISH REFLECTIVELY WITH TECHNOLOGY

A Project of IATEFL's Learning Technologies
Special Interest Group in collaboration with
TESOL's Computer-Assisted Language Learning
Interest Section

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Edited by Philip Hubbard and Sophie Ioannou-Georgiou



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*To the British Council and Michael
Carrier, whose support and vision made
this collaboration between the IATEFL
Learning Technologies SIG and TESOL
CALL Interest Section possible.*

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PREFACE

In 2011 Michael Carrier, then Director of English Language Innovation for the British Council, managed to secure funding from them to bring the two largest English teaching associations in the world closer together. TESOL and IATEFL have led the EFL/ESL field for decades and have established themselves as leaders in the professional support and development of EFL/ESL teachers. The associations include smaller groups to help teachers with the same interests and concerns come together and create their own professional communities. This is how teachers interested in implementing technology in their classes formed the Learning Technologies Special Interest Group (LT SIG in IATEFL, originally Micro Users in ESL Institutions (MUESLI)) and the Computer-Assisted Language Learning Interest Section (CALL-IS) in TESOL.

The LT SIG and the CALL-IS were the first two communities from IATEFL and TESOL to be brought together through British Council-funded exchange visits between the two associations. Bonds between the two communities grew, presentations from the two associations were exchanged, common concerns were discussed and there grew a need to do more together. The first joint project (see <http://ltsig.iatefl.org/archives/events/2013-2/201310-special-event/>) was a co-organised online conference in 2013 with presentations from members of both associations and open for all to attend.

The frequent, passionate, and long discussions between colleagues from both sides of the Atlantic often reached the same conclusion: the rapid development of the field promoted a short-term memory and a lack of reflection or analysis of all the research and understanding that has been accumulated through the years. Teachers, especially novice ones, presenting on both sites of the

REFLECTIONS ON USING E-ZINES IN ENHANCING EFL STUDENTS' CREATIVITY AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at a teacher's reflections on the effectiveness of an electronic magazine (E-zine) project in enhancing students' creativity and language ability. Despite the challenges the students faced, this project, which simulates the process involved in digital publishing, has reinforced their teamwork skills which enabled them to carry out the task. Evidence from student blog posts suggests that for some at least this task has also heightened their creativity in writing and producing visually-aesthetic front-to-back page layouts. The insights gained from this experience validated much of the teacher's work but also brought awareness of some changes needed in her teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Mass Media offered to third-year English-major college students at a private university in southern Taiwan broadly covered lessons on journalism, broadcasting, and advertising. By the end of the course, the students were expected to exhibit skills such as writing magazine/newspaper articles, planning and producing radio and TV shows, and writing media campaigns, photo journals, and blogs. Learning how to creatively

use digital tools was necessary to successfully complete an activity. The lessons were designed to prepare students to tackle tasks from simple to complex exercises; the level of difficulty gradually increased as their skills improved with time.

The class met for three hours once a week for 18 weeks and was conducted in a computer laboratory where each student (n=38) was allocated a computer. This kind of classroom environment made it easy to blend online technology into the curriculum. Together with the e-learning platform that the university provided for this course, a class wiki, students' individual blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube, other tools and websites such as Pixton and Issuu, and mobile devices that students already possessed were also added to the mix to create a more robust blended learning environment (Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012). Students could quickly catch up with whatever they had missed by checking the class wiki—they could conveniently find the resources needed or find where we were in the course (Teehan, 2010). The project-based learning and teaching (PBLT) approach was used as a framework in carrying out all task-based activities where each task provides scaffolding for the next one, thus leading to the accomplishment of the final goal (Fried-Booth, 1997). For example, in the e-zine project, the students worked in stages, from brainstorming to writing and editing, layouting and design to publishing.

This chapter describes my reflections on an e-zine project that was given to simulate the process involved in digital publishing. I review the effectiveness of the activity in stimulating and enhancing students' creativity and language skills, the challenges and difficulties involved, and the overall value of doing it.

THE PROJECT

I introduced the e-zine project after covering lessons on the different forms of print media which included writing for newspapers/magazines, photo journalism, banners and posters. The project took four weeks to finish. Lectures and group

discussions were held in the first week. During the second week, a hands-on workshop on using Publisher in designing front covers and inside page lay-outs was carried out; students also started working on their first drafts. By the third week, they conducted peer-reviews and revisions on drafts, compiled articles for inclusion in the e-zine, photoshoot, and designed final page lay-outs. In-class presentations were held during the fourth week where students showcased the contents of their e-zines. They were asked to write post-task reflections on their blogs; students also shared details of their e-zine production planning and group communications on Facebook.

I began by getting students to familiarize themselves with the contents of a magazine. We looked at the elements that make good front covers—the use of mastheads¹, catchy coverlines, dateline, main image (models), selling lines, bar codes, etc. I gave students an in-class exercise working on coverlines where they had to publish their studies on their blog. Coverlines are great to enhance the use of word play (rhymes & alliterations) and descriptive words that will appeal to readers, so they have to be catchy and interesting. Another in-class exercise was the brainstorming of magazine titles:² students had to come up with studies for a specific market niche. This can be a fun time to create outrageous titles.

Many students were already familiar with using Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Microsoft Paint since these software programs were regularly used in their academic life. Microsoft Publisher was also freely available and installed on all the desktop computers. I spent one class meeting to show them how to use Publisher for print layouts and designs. The other software programs such as Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, etc., were given as optional tools. There were computer graphic courses available in our institution that students could sign up for. Because some students had already taken these courses, they were knowledgeable and possessed the technical skills needed.

1 The masthead is the title/name of the magazine displayed in a specific typeface placed prominently on the front cover.

2 Magazine names and titles of articles are available at http://massmedia2013.pbworks.com/w/page/70654531/Students_Ezines.

I gave students another two to three weeks for the production stage which includes writing/editing articles, photoshoot, and layouting. The oral presentation, where they showcased their final projects, was done in the fourth week (mid-term week). Due to the difficulty and complexity of the task, it was given as a midterm exam project.

The project was collaborative in nature because the students had to work in groups. They were required to design and create an e-zine, which should include the following items:

1. The Front Cover
 - A. Name/title of the e-zine
 - B. Logo
 - C. Brief titles of featured articles
 - D. A picture that encapsulates the theme of the e-zine
2. Table of Contents
 - A. Titles of featured articles with paginations
 - B. Graphics/pictures consistent with the theme
3. Featured articles
 - A. Title
 - B. Article
 - C. Name of author, and other acknowledgements
 - D. Photos for featured articles must be relevant to the story. A signed consent form from people in the photos must be obtained prior to publication.
 - E. Each article must contain at least 4–5 paragraphs, and it must include a clear focus/message of the paper (what is the article about), body paragraphs which clearly support (expand, discuss, provide examples) the main point given in the introduction, concluding paragraph should summarize the story.
 - F. Each member must produce at least one essay to be contributed to the e-zine.
 - G. Peer-editing is highly advised before submitting the draft to the instructor for final review. Googledocs or MeetingWords, in addition to emails, can be used for easy access to the documents

- H. Layouts must be visually attractive
- I. Role and responsibilities can be but not limited to the following:
Writers, layout artists (front page, logo, pages for featured articles), photographers, editors

Oral Presentation

20 minutes were allocated for each group to present/showcase their work. They discussed the rationale for their choice of theme and title, articles, photos included for final publication, and logo design. Each member talked about his/her role and contributions to the group task. Final e-zines, published on Issuu.com¹, were exhibited during their presentation and showed a myriad of original articles, photos and illustrations. Students were informed about the importance of observing copyright laws. Web links of the published e-zine were shared via tweets and blog posts, which were also included in their post-task reflections.

Writing and Editing the Manuscript

The writing and editing of articles were given as an assignment due to the length and number of papers to be reviewed. Because these were longish papers, I reckoned that students would write better at their own time and pace. Unlike paragraph-writing exercises which can be done in the classroom, timing their article writing would only inhibit their creativity. It would have been impossible for me to give individual feedback on everybody's paper on the spot. So, I asked my students to email their work or the link to their document where I could edit it online. This gave me the time to read their articles and provide constructive feedback. Unfortunately, I did not foresee the amount of editing involved and the difficulties students went through. The next time I do this project, I would focus on responding to students' written work more efficiently. I would use symbols or error codes (abbreviations) which correspond to language features. I would create a page on

1. Issuu.com is a free digital publishing platform and includes publications from all parts of the globe, covering topics in fashion, lifestyle, art, sports and global affairs, see <http://Issuu.com>.

the class wiki for error codes; students should be able to check the meaning at their own time and space. Although, identifying mechanical errors is important, I would give general, content-related feedback instead of sentence-level corrections. I would also ask students to use their blogs and the class wiki to give me a continuous update throughout the project cycle that would reflect any issues or changes that need immediate attention.

All feature articles had at least four to five paragraphs each, which included 1) an introductory paragraph which gives a synopsis of what the article is about, 2) body paragraphs where they expand, discuss, and provide examples to support the main points, and 3) a concluding paragraph where they recap their ideas in a clear, summarizing manner, and tie together and integrate the various issues (points) raised in the paper. Students wrote original articles for this project because of the specific theme they were working on. I also suggested that they use Word documents and email for sharing or an online word/text editor such as MeetingWords.com, which they were introduced to in the photostory activity¹. Some of the students used this tool, but the majority relied on the traditional Word document and email when submitting their work for teacher feedback. I gather students tend to have preferences for choosing the familiar; this resonates with Salomon's study which suggests that students "will always be inclined to prefer the one in which they learned" (cited in Healy, 1998, p. 234).

I advised students to peer-edit their articles before submitting them to me for review. This does not guarantee that peer-edited articles would be foolproof, but the number of mistakes would be less (Keh, 1990). An example of a student's first draft that did not go through the peer review process (see Figure 1, Example 1) shows multiple writing errors. Example 2, on the other hand, was read and corrected by a classmate, thus containing fewer errors. However, it is important to note that the quality of peer feedback depends on the reviewer's English language proficiency and his/her ability to provide corrections. Thus, students in peer review groups would still need guidance from their instructors; nonetheless, the opinion of peers may be less intimidating (Craig, 2013).

1. Examples of students' drafts on a task using MeetingWords.com are available at http://massmedia2013.pbworks.com/w/page/69636919/Photostory_assignment.

Long-distance Relationship.

1

I am a girl who sinks into love deeply. Naturally, I share things that happened between me and my boyfriend with my friends very often. However, when they learned that he doesn't isn't studying in Kaohsiung but in Hsinchu, they always reveal in were shocked faces. Then it comes several following questions like "Don't Aren't you worried your boyfriend will have another a love affair?", "How can you stand not to seeing each other for a long time?" Whenever I answered them, they reveal in were surprised faces again. To me, long-distance relationship is not a problem with us. The only important thing is to trust and remain committed to each other.

2

India, is a country in South Asia. It is the seventh-largest country by area, the second-most populous country with over 1.2 billion people. This summer vacation I attend ed (joined) a school association (club?) called Aiesec, so I got the opportunity to go to Hyderabad (a city of India) for one and a half months as a volunteer. I went to the countryside to teach the children English; it is was an unforgettable experience.

Figure 1. Screenshot of students' common language errors

Some students had expressed in their post-reflection blog posts that for group communications they favored using Facebook (FB) over e-mail. Although using FB was not a requirement, they exchanged documents (Word files and location shoot photos) and made comments on each other's work via messages or on a private FB page specifically created for this project. The students took screenshots of their FB posts sent during the peer-review week and willingly shared them with me on the day of their presentation as evidence that they had read and corrected each other's essays. The messages suggest that many of them had revised their drafts at least two to three times; minor grammatical errors were corrected and parts that required further revisions due to poor phrasing or translation of ideas were highlighted. Peer reviewers also made suggestions on how to improve their writing; for example, they recommended adding longer and vivid descriptions of a place, person, or events. The manner and tone of internal communication that took place were polite, friendly, and generally helpful.

Students who were responsible for editing their group's papers experienced the process of responding, assessing and offering helpful comments. Below is an excerpt from a student's blog post reflecting on her role as editor; she remarked on the challenges that she encountered and that this experience made her cognizant of the difficulties involved in editing and publishing.

... It's really a tough work. I had to read carefully and correct the grammar errors and then sometimes re-organize their work. As I did the editing, it's really interesting to read their ideas and know their writing styles. I really learned a lot from the editing... Besides, I learned from my peers' mistakes... By doing this e-zine homework, I realize that publishing a work is never easy. I have to put interesting ideas in my article to attract readers. I have to check again and again to make sure there are no mistakes. Though it was time-consuming, I still enjoyed it. *A student's blog post.*

CREATIVE FREEDOM

Each student was required to contribute at least one article to the ezine. The creation and publication of the ezine, however, required a fair division of labor among group members. As a group they had to discuss and decide who would be responsible for doing a particular job (role and responsibilities). Before the group discussions, I asked them to do a quick self-analysis. This self-assessment is crucial in mapping out their individual strengths (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999). Understanding what their strengths are could help amplify their skills and contributions in the presence of other team members with complementary talents, which can actually be good for boosting collective intelligence and strengthening group dynamics (Dooly, 2008). Those students with exceptional skills in drawing or using computer graphics could take on the role of visual/layout artists; those with impressive writing/reading skills can be editors; and those who possess a creative eye for photography can be photographers, etc. Below is an excerpt from a student's blog post regarding her role as layout artist¹.

1 Also known as art editor

When we distributed the jobs to everyone, I volunteered to do the lay-out because I have loved to paint and been passionate at design. I also have used Photoshop before. I was happy that I could use these skills in doing this work- though I spent a lot of time finishing the whole e-zine...I enjoyed it because it not only let me learn more but it also inspired my creativity and ability." *A student's blog post*

This project also gave students the chance to bring out their hidden talents and to show their classmates that they can be savvy in other creative outlets. A good example is Alice, who seemed to be very shy and introverted, yet unbeknownst to many she had been to a design school and had participated in a fashion show. The title and theme of Alice's group's e-zine was La Vie, a women's magazine about style/trend news, shopping information, beauty tips, etc. As shown in Figure 2, Alice wrote an essay about her experiences in designing. In this article, she included pictures of her drawings and the dresses that she actually designed and made herself. The pull quote on her page which says, "It brings me not only satisfaction but also confidence," says a lot about Alice and how she feels about fashion design. Although she admitted having difficulty doing this page layout, as she had tried learning several tools before settling for Illustrator, at the end of the day she was pleased that she had persevered. The page she created showcased her clothing designs and her story that nobody knew about.



Figure 2. A Designed Dress E-zine article

Photoshoot

The photoshoot for the images they needed for their pages came soon after the theme and articles had been forwarded in; laying out and designing the overall look was next, and the last step was to double check content and the final touches. The ready-to-publish version was then uploaded¹ to Issuu.com for publication- this is where the magazines took on a different feel and look. The e-zines came to life and the pages look amazingly good in digital format which can be read on computers, tablets, and smart phones.

In the excerpt below, it shows an example of how students planned and coordinated their schedules for photo shoots and how the success of a photography session can vary depending on the weather and other contingent factors.

¹ At least one member should sign up for a free account on Issuu.com to be able to upload files.

During the production period, we made an appointment [sic] to shoot our cover picture. In my opinion this was the most difficult part. Because pursuing the quality of being in nature, getting the right lighting (from the sun) for the background, we changed and had different poses, and did a lot of re-takes doing the same pose(s) again and again under the hot sun... A student's blog post

Going out for a location shooting involved more than simply heading out to the place; some had to buy affordable treats that would be featured in the article and actually eat them. Figure 3 is a screenshot of the page written and created by Jill. In this article she described a coffee restaurant frequently visited by students. Located near the university campus, Jill went to this coffee shop and asked permission to shoot and to write a feature story about the place as part of her course assignment. The manager agreed and granted her access to the restaurant. The result is a four-paragraph descriptive essay that describes the shop and its brief history; her piece was a written account of her experience visiting the restaurant and interviewing the manager. Although her work can be considered a novice piece of journalistic writing, she managed to conduct research and gathered information. Her style of reporting can be improved and it was noted during her presentation that she should have mentioned the names of the people (owners and the manager) in her paper. Nonetheless, her article included a number of visually captivating photos that featured the local area, the food and of course, the coffee sold in this shop. Jill admitted that the pie and coffee shown in these pages were later on devoured after the shoot.



Figure 3. A Good Taste E-zine Article

When Opinions Clash

As there are benefits in collaborative tasks, engaging in any form of collaboration may bring about clash of views and diverse opinions, and this, according to Järvenoja & Järvelä (2013) is where "collaboration and task completion is compromised or endangered" (p. 165). However, when a group successfully finds a mutually satisfactory solution, collaborating can increase group productivity. One group in class had a similar experience where some members were pretty headstrong about their views and preferences regarding individual page designs. One member was vocal about a particular group member who designed her page background without considering the overall theme of the e-zine. It resulted in having pages with varied illustrations; some looked professionally done¹, while others were childlike drawings. On her blog post, she wrote that this collaborative task made her 'recognize and understand other people's characteristics and preferences'. Difficult as it may seem, working effectively in groups is something that students need to learn. It is very important in today's work environment.

¹ Storytellers Ezine is available at http://issuu.com/467020/docs/storyteller__1__1

And learning to perform in/with a team is a skill that can be transferred and applied to all contexts and situations, and being adept at it increases the likelihood of personal and professional success. For future projects that require team work, I would spend time discussing with students the nature of collaborative tasks and the many issues associated with them, which can be prevented or at least minimized if students are aware of them. I would identify common problematic areas and provide suggestions on how to resolve them. For instance, it would be better if students develop a shared understanding of the task and the importance of the members' individual contribution to its success. I would provide specific strategies such as establishing an agreed timeline, giving equal opportunities for each member to share ideas and engage in brainstorming, and most importantly, to open the level of communication and ensure that all opinions are valued.

E-zine Rubric

The students were assessed using a self-made rubric¹ which provided a list of benchmarks based on the given task requirements and guidelines. I posted it on the class wiki and on the e-learning course platform. This provided me a means of communicating expectations and listing a set of criteria, which defines the necessary components of the task. In this rubric, the criteria included content (front cover, table of contents, layout, and feature story), editing, roles & responsibilities and presentation. With a weighted score (0–10 points) assigned to each criterion, scoring was made simpler and more objective. However, this rubric can still be improved by adding the different levels of competence (or completion of work) with a score assigned to each level. In other words, the rubric should also show progressions from poor to exemplary exhibition of work. What is missing in this rubric is a description of what constitutes excellent work compared to poor rendition of skills. Having a list of criteria is good, but adding performance descriptors with an assigned proficiency scale would make the task assessment better as it would help students evaluate the quality of their own work (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

¹ The rubric is available online at http://massmedia2013.pbworks.com/w/page/69704794/Ezine_Rubric

REFLECTIONS

As I look back at the overall effectiveness of doing a task-based activity on teaching students about e-zine publications, I believe that despite the difficulties that they faced in the production process it was a positive learning experience. Students got to hone their skills and learned new ones that enriched their knowledge and understanding of the concepts and practice in simulating the world of digital publishing.

This ezine project gave students the chance to write short articles about various thematic issues. Those who did multiple revisions on their articles and layouts experienced the pains and joys of writing and editing. Students who found writing in English difficult had received extra support from their peers through the comments made on their drafts and numerous FB messages. Those whose work did not go through the peer-review process had received more corrections from me compared to those whose work had been peer-reviewed and edited at least twice. Although students had to learn how to write and revise their compositions based on either the peer reviewer's and instructor's feedback, mistakes still occurred. In hindsight, perhaps it would have helped the students if I had allotted more time for verbal feedback (Min, 2006) to foster better understanding of what improvements were needed. On one hand, it would have integrated well with the multiple-draft process, which according to Jahin (2012) should be an integral part of the writing classroom. On the other hand, writing was not strictly the focus of this course. Concentrating too much on the writing process would have caused imbalance on how the course objectives should be aligned and supported by instruction. For a large class such as this one, I concur with Ur (1999) that correcting compositions is time-consuming. However, this, in many ways, is a simulation of what magazine editors do and experience- constantly reviewing materials, checking for clarity and brevity (Rocha, 2001), and yet, it is possible to still miss something and make a mistake (Barrett, 2011).

Another lesson that I learned from this experience is the importance of teamwork. As mentioned previously, it is essential to acknowledge the common problems students face when working with others; awareness of relevant issues can help curb any inherent

dilemma. I have also learned the value of reflection and feedback; these can and should be done not only after the project but throughout the project cycle. A progress report or weekly update on the blog (or a comment posted on the class wiki) should help raise any concerns that need immediate attention. Bringing up a question or a personal concern must be encouraged rather than frowned upon. In this way, students learn how to express their opinions, to listen, and respect others' ideas. It would also be helpful to give students a sample case scenario/study where team conflict occurs and discuss viable solutions. The point is to make them grasp the idea that successful teamwork requires negotiation, compromise, and the ability to clarify misunderstandings. Conflicts can be troublesome but I have learned that by facing them, communicating and brainstorming solutions can encourage open communication and build trust among each other. In a nutshell, despite the challenges, this project fostered individual and collective effort, and in the process students improved their interpersonal skills as they found ways to promote better communication and problem solving strategies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the e-zine project enhanced students' language skills as demonstrated by the catchy titles, informative articles and sometimes personal accounts of events and experiences, and the meaningful blog entries on post-task reflections. The featured articles in their ezines were written in a language that is not their mother tongue, and yet used it as a tool in finding their voice to share their stories. Teachers who are contemplating in adopting this e-zine project should be aware of the importance of allotting time for multiple revisions on drafts and the tribulations of teamwork. Nonetheless, this project has proven to heighten students' creativity as they used their ingenuity and resourcefulness to produce impressive and visually-aesthetic page layouts that added emotional and tactile appeal. It allowed the integration of their multiple intelligences, giving them the chance to explore their own skills and to experience the pleasure (and difficulty) of writing that goes beyond the monochrome print.

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The purpose of the present volume is in demonstrating a variety of ways in which teachers using technology can do so more effectively by 1) identifying and incorporating findings from others' research and practice, and 2) reflecting both during and after employing technology to determine what worked as expected and what did not in order to improve outcomes in the future. In this introductory chapter, we expand on the notion of teaching English and other languages reflectively with technology and offer guidelines for incorporating this into teaching practice. In doing so, we hope to help bridge the current gap between formal research and practice in this field.

