

EXAMINING LEARNERS' AND INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF BLENDED WIKI SESSIONS TO IMPROVE PROFESSIONALS' WRITING SKILLS

Debashismoy Dutta

Lecturer

BRAC Institute of Languages (BIL), BRAC University

email: debashismoy@gmail.com, debashis@bracu.ac.bd

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the learners' and instructors' perspectives on *wiki* based virtual writing sessions while investigating the effectiveness and challenges of such blending in a demand-driven English language course for mid-level BRAC managers who are in need of improving their English writing skills. It shows how a psychological barrier-free ideal writing environment was created for the managers through DevNet, a *wiki spaces* based platform, during a eight-week-long course. In particular, this paper assesses the strategies followed to fill the vacuity of instructor's physical absence and also to involve the participants in collaborative learning. Qualitative data collected from the learners and the instructors through interviews was analyzed to understand learners' and instructors' perspectives on virtual writing sessions, to measure the effectiveness of those sessions, and also to identify the challenges in blending information and communication technology (ICT) tools in the English course for the professionals. Findings show that blending of *wiki* sessions with regular face-to-face (F2F) classroom sessions significantly improves learners' writing skills and helps them to reflect on their classroom sessions by using own language, commenting on peer posts, arguing against peer-views as well as appreciating good writing and new ideas. This paper emphasizes the need of synchronous instruction, thought-igniting deferential feedback and parallel arrangement of the *wiki*-session contents with F2F classroom sessions to help learners develop their writing. Opportunity for asynchronous activities, however, always remains valid because of the comparative permanence of the written posts in the DevNet. The paper also highlights how similar strategies can be adopted, especially for professionals, through ICT-based media in a fast-changing web-based era.

Key words: Virtual writing session, collaborative learning, blending, synchronous instruction.

Innovation in language teaching methodologies and the advent of information and communication technology (ICT) have driven language teaching professionals to find out contextually appropriate and culturally suitable classroom materials and to design instructional strategies to best serve learners' needs. Besides, the importance of learning English, especially in Bangladesh, has transcended the boundary of formal educational institutions, making the learners more diverse than ever. Learners from different age-groups, various professional sectors, with diverse motivational factors and specific language needs have made language teaching more challenging than ever. In these circumstances, it becomes imperative for language teachers to find out contextually and culturally suitable instructional strategies keeping abreast with ICT boons. Offering *wiki* based

blended English language courses to BRAC professionals is such an effort.

The writing skill is generally considered the most difficult one to master by language learners and this difficulty significantly increases when writing is done in English which is a Foreign Language (FL) for many learners in Bangladesh. The long-practised grammar-translation method in English language teaching, prior to its "going communicative" (Hamid, 2005) in 1997, has always kept most of the Bangladeshi learners out of the fair reach of functional competency in English even though they have attended English courses from the early stage of primary education till Higher Secondary level where the medium of instruction is predominantly Bangla (L1). These non-English background graduates gradually make

their way to different professions and face little difficulty to adjust there as most of the spoken-written communication in professional field is done in L1. However, in recent times, rapid globalization, revolution in the ICT sector and global presence of many Bangladeshi development organizations such as BRAC, have resulted in the need for professionals with a fair communicative competence in English. Moreover, world-wide developments in ICT, and the quick advent and gradual adoption of ICT in Bangladesh have coincided with the replacement of traditional written English communication modes with computer-mediated ones. Clearly, these changes demand ICT habituation and better English skills on the part of the professionals.

In view of this, BRAC Institute of Languages (BIL), BRAC University is collaborating with BRAC, the largest development organization of the world, to develop its mid-level managers' spoken and written English competency so as to make them confident in their managerial roles. In fact, BRAC is in need of managers who are expert in program operations, competent in verbal and written English Communication, and sound in ICT know-how with cross-cultural awareness to cater for the growing demand from Asian and African countries where it operates. These mid-career professionals have observed the inception of communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, its gradual adoption by teachers and students along with the sudden upsurge of ICT connectivity in Bangladesh which resulted in a new breed of assertive graduates equipped with English competence and ICT skills posing These new graduates pose a challenge to the mid-career professionals. Thus they also realise the extreme necessity of being up-to-date with all the necessary skills to meet organizational demands and also to take the challenges put forward by the millennial generation. Set in this context, this paper will examine learners' and instructors' perspectives on the virtual writing sessions; the effectiveness of blending *wiki* based virtual sessions in improving learners writing skills; and the opportunities and challenges of such blending.

Literature Review

Compared to the research literature on ICT-mediated writing skills development courses in the developed-world context, research literature on these fields for the EFL context of Bangladesh is

truly scarce. There are also research literatures on blended courses, adult education with overarching teaching-learning philosophies. Though the researchers are not always in unison but they provide us with significant insight in the huge enterprise of teaching writing skills in a fast changing world.

Adult language learners significantly differ in their attitude and approach towards learning compared with younger students. Adults may lag behind in communicative competence in English but are seasoned in real-life events with years of job-experience. Adult learners love to be involved directly in the learning process with whatever experience they have gained and try to learn further with active involvement and participation. Renowned adult educator Malcolm Knowles (1973) recognized much early that, "in any situation in which an adult's experience is being devalued or ignored, the adult perceives this as not rejecting just his experience, but rejecting him as a person" (46). Long experience of dealing with adult learners helped Knowles (1984) identify the following traits (as cited in West & West, 2009, p. 25): autonomous and self-directed, experienced, practical and goal oriented, relevancy oriented. While Knowles emphasizes the importance of the life-experience in adult learning context, Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory underpins the importance of social interaction among the members of a learning community which demands active participation. In that line, Moller (1998) comes up with similar observation: "passive learning limits learners and causes them to mirror presented knowledge, rather than allowing them to grow their own expertise" (115). Kimura, Obari and Goda (2011) also support learners' active participation thus: "Learning is more effective when learners are active in the learning process, assuming responsibility for their learning and participating in the decisions that affect it" (38). Therefore, adult learners' vast life-experience and their eagerness to participate actively in the learning process are highly valued by the researchers.

The nature of adult learners and a suitable learning environment for them drive us to think on the issue of desired learning outcome. As the adult learners learn differently than formal students the learning outcome from intended sessions also differs significantly. These differences can be markedly identified in Jonassen's view contrasting the

constructivist and objectivist paradigms as cited by Bellefeuille (2006):

... the difference between constructivist and objectivist paradigms is that objective instructional design predetermines outcome and intervenes in the learning process to map a predetermined concept of reality onto the learner's mind, while the constructivist design maintains that learning outcomes are not always predictable, and instruction, therefore, should foster, not control, learning. (87)

Keeping these research findings and learning theories in mind, we need to deal with adult learners differently than the formal learners. DevNet sessions provide them with an excellent platform for bringing in their life experiences, life-skills and professional skills in the writing sessions. The sessions also to make them believe that they are not mere passive receivers of teacher-dictated knowledge and teacher-experienced world, but they can contribute significantly in the learning process.

Adult learners also expect some respect because of their experiences and achievements in existing social setting. This helps them to accommodate better in the learning process which results in better outcome. Halio (2004) puts weight on the adult learners' experience thus:

... with several years of work experience under their belts and a sense of skills and accomplishments in areas about which we know nothing, but for the first time in many years, perhaps, they are being asked to perform in an academic environment that may seem threatening or alien. (59)

Halio points to the fact that many of the adult learners were, perhaps, very good performers during their regular academic years under familiar instructional strategies but may now feel awkward and uncomfortable with the changed instructional strategies with technological assistance. Taking similar issues into consideration, Combs, Avila, and Purkey (1971), Weinstein and Fantini (1970), Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) (as cited in Lesniak & Hodes, 2000) prefer psychologically comfortable environment in distance learning which has multifarious effects in developing learners competency in the intended skills. To ensure such an environment an instructor needs to be a facilitator instead of a disseminator of

knowledge (Moller, 1998, 116). Moore discussed the concept of 'transactional distance' and also refers to a 'dialogue' that takes place between the instructor and the learners otherwise separated by space in synchronous setting and by time and space in asynchronous setting (as cited in Lesniak & Hodes, 2000). On the other hand, learners need to possess some characteristics to tap the benefits of technology. According to Tapscott and Williams (as cited in West & West, 2009) being open, peering, sharing, acting globally are four necessary learner traits to work and learn through online media. They suggested openness as very important because once the posts are uploaded in wikis, they become public in *wikis* or semi-public in *wikispaces*, tested by readers' correction, modification or edition where writers need to resort to collective ownership of written products.

On another note, Scollon and Scollon's dichotomy (as cited in Hsien-Chin Lion, 2011) between F2F and "internet-mediated life" (3) have already started to influence the lives of people in a developing country like Bangladesh. Therefore, traditional learning opportunities blended with ICT based tools might include wider learner community to build a pool of competent professionals. Chapelle (2009) cites the benefits of technology thus: "Technology dramatically extends and changes the breadth of exposure that learners can have with the target language and interactive events in which they have the opportunity for language focus" (750). Language instructors also understand the need to reap the benefits of such a versatile tool.

Whatever the expectations may be, technological innovations and their subsequent adoption do not necessarily guarantee their fruitful use as educational tools. These gadgets have multifarious uses where educative role is only part of that. Pedagogical and instructional innovations, technological habituation and integrative motivation on the part of the learners are necessary to convert these modern ICT boons into learning tools. Years of adaptation process is also necessary for such technologies to be brought to common people's use. Though the importance of providing learners the opportunity to acquire linguistic competence of a discourse community by using technology in their socio-cultural context is emphasized, difficulties to make that happen were also asserted (Alm-Lequeux, 2001). Rahman (2014) makes us conscious about the research

findings on educational innovation where users' "long-established perceptions and traditional practices" (p. 1) make the journey difficult. We may recall here Garrett's memorable observation (as cited in Chapelle, 2009): "Technology that can be taken for granted is already light years ahead of the professions' ability to integrate a principled use of it into the classroom and the curriculum" (74). On the contrary, Kress (2005) argues that "resources are never entirely apt but will need to be transformed in relation to all the contingencies of this environment now and the demands made" (20). Moreover, virtual presence requires special skills on the part of the instructors. They can "promote" the learners' motivation by solving problems they may face, clarifying instructions, and by being sympathetic towards learners' emotions which ultimately help to achieve the learning objectives (Tammelinn, Peltonen & Puranen, 2011). That is, appropriate instructional strategies in accordance with the learners' needs and their motivation may bring gradual success in the use of technology for language learning purpose.

Description of the Blended Course and DevNet

BRAC Institute of Languages, BRAC University offers 8-week-long needs-based course to BRAC mid-level managers and DevNet is an integral part of it. DevNet uses *wikispaces*, a Web 2.0 based class *wiki*, as its platform. It was commenced on January 24, 2010 by Centre for Languages (CfL) which is now known as BRAC Institute of Languages (BIL), BRAC University and is affiliated with University Grants Commission (UGC), Bangladesh.

There persists an indecisiveness on the terminological issues for blended learning which was also mentioned by Whittaker (2013). He referred to varied terms used by researchers such as – Stracke's "hybrid or mixed learning", Shepard's "e-learning", and Banados' "b-learning". Smith and Kurthen defined blended subjects in Gruba and Hinkelman (as cited in Whittaker, 2013) as "that utilizes some significant online activities in otherwise face-to-face learning, but less than 45 per cent". Whittaker (*ibid.*) reflects on the issue thus:

Despite these perceived differences I would argue that many of the terms are synonymous and that in ELT 'blended learning' is the term most commonly used to refer to any combination of face-to-face (F2F) teaching

with computer technology (online and offline activities/materials).

Considering the above definitions and ignoring the subtle differences we can refer to the course, on which this research is conducted, as a blended one where *wikispaces*-based DevNet sessions were incorporated along with F2F classroom sessions specifically for developing the learners' writing skills. Usually an instructor/administrator controls the activities of each DevNet session and invites the participants each having a unique user name and password. Participants attend two virtual DevNet sessions each week along with usual F2F sessions. Different language learning activities can be performed from this platform and the instructor chooses one of the options focusing learners' needs and desired outcome. Keeping abreast of modern, innovative language teaching practices, BIL tries to offer the best language learning opportunities to the wider community including adult learners.

Justification of the Study

This section justifies the need for the current study in the EFL context of Bangladesh. It is generally agreed upon that ICT tools may provide enormous educational opportunities. Bangladesh is adopting ICT at a faster pace than expected even a few years back. According to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) the total number of internet subscribers stood at 42281931 thousand at the end of September, 2014 (BTRC, 2014) from that of 31140804 thousand at the end of February, 2012 (BTRC, 2012), which is 36% (Approx.) growth just within 30 months. Whatever the influences are of new technology at its inception, gradually its boons can be incorporated in the various learning activities for greater inclusion of the society as human beings quickly adapt themselves to new technologies. Keeping contemporary learner-centered language teaching methodologies in view, BIL provided the BRAC managers the opportunity to deal with their own learning in DevNet sessions. Given the potential of the ICT tools in language learning, the current study tries to gauge learners' perception of a blended course in developing writing skills and the accompanying role of the virtual instructor. This study tried to assess the language teaching-learning outcome with due considerations for pedagogical and instructional implications. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How can *wikispaces*-based writing sessions help adult learners to improve their writing skills?
2. How can the communication dynamics between the instructors and the learners be dealt with during the spatial gap of a blended course?

Methodology

Context

The present study was conducted with 45 mid-level BRAC managers who received the eight-week-long language course in three batches. As the learners are at the centre of any language course, their responses during the interview were given supreme importance for this research. Referring to Fraser's suggestion Bellefeuille (2006) commented, "... students in a learning environment are in a good position to evaluate instruction, because most have had experience with many other learning environments" (94). Instructors, who were involved in conducting the *wikispaces*-based sessions had very important roles as supervisor, monitor and guide of the learners.

Participants

The subjects (learners) of this study were homogeneous in some aspects but heterogeneous in terms of some other criteria. They were all BRAC mid-level managers having masters from different streams and with the endemic weaknesses in English language skills which persist in the EFL context of Bangladesh. They were aged between thirty and forty-eight years with varied experience in the job, different motivation level in learning and adopting language skills and with differences in their proficiency level. Generally they were considered as of lower-intermediate level but at various stages of learning continuum. These ambiguities in their English proficiency level, age-difference, and professional experience are considered while taking sessions in DevNet.

Data Collection

Keeping the research objectives in view, qualitative were collected from the learners with an informed consent to participate in the study. A semi-structured questionnaire with ten open-ended questions was given to learners (referred to as

respondents hereafter) with a view to eliciting their perceptions on, and experience of the use of virtual DevNet sessions. Learners' posts from *wikispaces* database were also investigated for comparing and analyzing learners' responses in connection with their writing development. Moreover, observations of four instructors, who remained behind the wall, were also collected through short interviews.

Findings and Discussions

Qualitative data collected through interviews with the learners and the instructors were analysed and categorized under four heads: virtual platform for writing development, peer feedback for writing development, role of the virtual instructor, and environment of virtual classroom.

Virtual platform for writing development

All the respondents of the study commented positively on the inclusion of virtual DevNet sessions to improve their writing skills. First of all, they liked this new experience of taking the responsibility of own learning in almost an independent atmosphere. Next, they focused on the multifarious learning resources available on the Internet which helped them during writing sessions. Browsing for information using search engines, finding word meaning via online dictionary, checking collocations, reading articles related to DevNet sessions were some of the learning opportunities they availed while working on DevNet. The following response taken from the learners' interview validates the acceptance of these virtual sessions.

My experience of the DevNet writing sessions were very interesting. I can search information in internet. I prefer DevNet because I can share my ideas and knowledge with each other. I can get enough time for thinking and writing. It's a great opportunity for me.

Sixty per cent of the respondents preferred DevNet writing sessions over classroom writing sessions. They referred to the unpredictable nature of the writing assignments which inspired them to write more without any hesitation. They could relate various topics with their daily experiences which encouraged them to write in DevNet sessions. Moreover, it seemed to them a more open a platform to write posts with personal opinions. While the classroom writing sessions often fail to

meet expectations, virtual sessions filled that gap. However, the rest of the respondents preferred classroom sessions because they could then apply the content learning in writing and ask for instructor's help.

Half of the respondents wanted socio-political issue related topics for their DevNet writing sessions; one-third of the total respondents preferred class-content related topics while rest of them preferred randomly selected topics. An interesting but not quite unexpected finding is that all the learners wanted the DevNet sessions to be continued as a part of the aforementioned course. They identified the motivational factors of this new instructional strategy and also referred to the importance of becoming conversant with computer-mediated-communication (CMC) which might ultimately develop them as competent and up-to-date managers in a transient, non-government job context. About half of the respondents were new to ICT use and they expressed astonishments at the resourcefulness of the Internet. Whenever any writing topic was given they would search for related topics on the internet and could also search for appropriate words, word-meaning. These ultimately improved their writing skills and ICT skills. Respondents agreed that they could measure the improvement in their writing skills looking back and forth to various posts.

Instructors also identified the learners' enthusiasm in the DevNet sessions. They provided an important insight regarding learners' preference of DevNet topics which was that proficient learners preferred open topics but low-proficiency learners preferred class-content related topics. Instructors pointed to learners' motivational factors which ultimately resulted in either better or poorer performance in terms of the number of posts and engagement with the activity both in synchronous setting and in asynchronous setting. Instructors came across some DevNet posts which were actually posted beyond the scheduled class time. However, all these activities depended on writing proficiency and the level of motivation of the learners.

Peer feedback for writing development

Half of the respondents said that they provided feedback on their peers' posts. Sometimes they provided feedback in writing and verbally on the instructions. DevNet sessions allowed them to talk

and discuss the points of difficulty with one another in the absence of the instructor. They used to draft the writing or discussion topic in a word file first; then they used to post the final draft in DevNet discussion board. Therefore learners could provide feedback to peers while walking around and reading the texts drafted in the word file. As the posts are usually preserved in the *wikispaces* database, learners could also read those in their leisure. Sometimes they could identify their own mistakes and corrected themselves in future writing. This practice was possible because of the more permanent nature of writing in comparison with the transience of verbal production. Reference to a few more responses from learners' interview will shed light on their excitement over the opportunity to read and comment on peer posts.

1. I have enjoyed reading posts of my peers in Devnet. I believe that it help [*sic*] me and enhance [*sic*] my learning. I can read, I can give comment or suggestions. I myself can rectify my mistakes through reading and writing.
2. My response to my peers reading my post ... is positive. Even it helps me to identify the errors. I will get opportunity [*sic*] learn from my peers.

The issue of comparative permanence of the *wiki* posts was identified by both Cumming (Cumming, 1990) and Harklau (Harklau, 2002). For that reason they emphasized the feasibility of corrective feedback on writing tasks. The helpful database support of *wikispaces* behind DevNet helps the instructors and the learners to read, analyze, compare and provide feedback on peer writings. These also support the concept of "scaffolding & collective scaffolding" (Donato, 1994). This real-time opportunity helped all the learners of a course to form a collaboration what was expressed by Harmer (2004) as "access to others" minds and knowledge' (73). Citing Cognition and Technology Group's research findings Bellefeuille (2006) also asserted that learners' engagement in the learning process and exchanges of viewpoints help them develop a common understanding. Holec (1981) referred to this "ability to take charge of one's learning" (3) as autonomy. Franco (2008) further discusses Bauman's idea of 'liquid modernity' in relation to the wiki-based writing products of EFL learners where the writings or posts are left in a fluid state open to perusal, correction and feedback of peers. This process of revision, correction and

feedback ultimately results in better writing. This was also supported by the respondents as they viewed peer feedback and correction helpful developing writing skills.

Instructors pointed **toalimitation** of DevNet where peers can write a post making comments or pointing to the area of improvement but cannot correct the main post. At the same time, they pointed to the positive side of this limitation. Learners can look to the primary post at any point of the learning continuum. Instructors also identified learners' apparent unwillingness to provide feedback, or to refute the arguments or viewpoints of their peers logically. They were more willing to put forward their viewpoints instead of refuting their peers systematically, using appropriate language. Instructors had to goad them often to bring out the feedback posts or response posts. One point here is their unwillingness to focus on others' writing and the other was to become rigid with own view point. It seemed that to lose ground in argumentation equaled losing face in front of peers.

Role of the virtual instructor

During the first one or two sessions the instructors helped the participants to understand the DevNet operations. Virtual sessions were conducted hereafter either from university building or faculty room and the learners remained in the ICT laboratory. Two-thirds of the respondents took the absence of instructor positively, appreciating the psychological barrier-free environment. The remaining respondents were hesitant in this regard citing that instructor would have helped them if s/he were present during the sessions. However, they agreed that they could have asked for clarification posing questions to the instructor which they did not often try to do. The following response of a learner helps us understand the communication dynamics between the learners and the instructors during the DevNet sessions.

Using Devnet, sending and receiving comments and suggestion connect me with the instructor during these virtual sessions.

A few of the respondents confessed that on some occasions they copied from their peers or from online sources, mainly when they failed to grasp the content due to their lack of linguistic competence. Instructors had to clarify the topics

then. They had to appreciate genuine writing and discard the copied or plagiarized ones. In their response, participants also pointed to frequent instructor guidance motivating them not to plagiarize but to produce own language. Instructors also delineated the importance of explaining issues related to plagiarism and academic ethics to the learners from the very onset of the course.

Learners' responses also made it clear that difference in linguistic competence made the same topic easier for someone but difficult for a few of them. It was evident in their posts. The instructors had to give tasks keeping all the participants' ability in mind and might add differentiated instructions for efficient participants once they had done with the primary tasks.

Environment of virtual classroom

All the participants agreed that they enjoyed the environment of the ICT laboratory. Regular F2F writing instructions result in some immediacy among the adult-learners often reducing the time and space which they expect having substantial experience of the practical and professional world. Even in a learner-centered classroom occasions arise when instructors need to control off-track interaction dynamics to reach the session objectives which ultimately reduces the opportunity to explore creative, novel outcomes. DevNet sessions provided learners the opportunity to delve into psychological barrier-free spontaneous process of thinking, interlocution and to present the post. Participants enjoyed DevNet activities in virtual synchronous sessions which seemed to them less intimidating and thus they were able to work without any psychological barrier. However, they needed to be well connected with the instructors through the Internet so as to receive instructions as deemed necessary and to avoid any sense of abandonment among learners. Respondents agreed that they used to converse in L1 during the DevNet sessions taking the spatial-gap between the instructors and the learners where an opportunity for target language (L2) practice, though in speaking, was actually missed.

Flexibility of provision, supporting diversity, enhancing the campus experience, operating in a global context and efficiency were some important characteristics of blended e-learning courses as identified by Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts & Francis (2006). DevNet sessions, facilitated for the adult

BRAC professionals supported diversity, provided the learners with extended classroom experience and helped them to deal with Internet-based global knowledge but did not guarantee flexibility of provision for all as it was part of the eight-week-long residential course which incurred huge bills to be provided by the organization the learners serve.

Conclusion

Collaborative writing sessions of a blended course help learners to learn from peers, from their feedback, and also from the vast online resource base in a less intimidating environment. Another important benefit of these sessions is to make learners face a large amount of writing productions from close-competency learners. The present study shows that technological affordances can be tapped to develop language skills even in a developing country like Bangladesh. Offering equitable learning opportunity in such a populous country is really difficult, at least in the present socio-economic contexts. However, a rapid growth in ICT sector and quick adoption of technology by the masses make us hopeful to tap the educational opportunities of ICT tools. Appropriate instructional strategies can make the use of ICT tools easier and fruitful for writing skills development in English.

One of the limitations of the current study is that it studied the use of *wiki*-based blending for a group of seasoned professionals having varied life-experiences which does not necessarily emphasize or exclude its further application for learners from diverse groups from remote locations. Nevertheless, we have to ensure the provisions to make it feasible in other contexts. Further empirical research needs to be conducted to assess the applicability of *wiki*-based blending of English language courses and to design appropriate instructional strategies that can serve widely the community of learners. Findings of this study and further examination of new scopes may bring language learning close at hand to many professionals in near future which will ultimately result in the development of communicative competence and will help them to enter into and continue a profession taking the challenges of a fast changing world.

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