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**A Virtual Learning Environment in an ESL Classroom
in a Technical University in India**

S. Gunasekaran, M.A. M.Phil., Ph.D.

Introduction – My Objective

This paper aims at presenting the enriched learning experiences that my engineering students had in an ESL classroom despite the prevalence of a number of constraints. Creating a virtual environment in the ESL context is quite challenging, as there are limitations in using new technologies in our teaching. However, in order to promote effective learning of Corporate English among my students I conducted an action research. I trained them in communication skills with the help of two web tools Podcasts and blogs.

My objective was to:

1. Teach new expressions that are normally used in corporate communication;
2. Create a podcast and upload the dialogues written by the students into it;
3. Create a ‘class blog’ for students to post their summary of news stories on current affairs.

The Need for Training in Corporate Culture

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A Virtual Learning Environment in an ESL Classroom in a Technical University in India

The idea of conducting this study arose when I noticed a need for training the students in corporate culture and successful work patterns. Most of the students have specialized in Technical subjects in their BE/B.Tech. programmes and have virtually no exposure to corporate culture.

I felt that by creating a virtual environment the corporate world could be brought into the classroom, which, in turn, would stimulate a firsthand experience. To support my view, I found a few interesting articles on podcasts and in one such article Kenneth Beare points out, ‘Podcasting is especially interesting for English learners as it provides a means for students to get access to “authentic” listening sources about almost any subject that may interest them.’ Teachers can take advantage of podcasts as a basis for listening comprehension exercises, as a means of generating conversation based on students’ reaction to podcasts, and as a way of providing each and every student diverse listening materials.

Further I believed that the resources and tools offered by the Internet would motivate the students to perform better while taking up jobs in leading organizations.

A Brief Description of the Curriculum That I’m Required to Follow

It is essential in this context to give a brief description of the curriculum that I handle for III year BE/B.Tech students. It focuses on training students in soft skills apart from imparting domain knowledge for them to work in the corporate world. The curriculum aims at enhancing communication skills among students and evaluating their oral proficiency as well as written communication. A record book is maintained to assess students’ performance continuously (twice a week at least). In order to meet those demands the training sessions had to incorporate listening components as well.

How to Achieve the Goals Set by the Curriculum?

How could this be done with the diversified aim of training students in soft skills like interpersonal, persuasive, selling skills, just to name a few, apart from exposing the students to the corporate world? The most feasible option was using web tools like Podcasts and Blogs. The action research conducted and published earlier by various researchers, it was found out that listening to podcasts helped students to improve their oral communication whereas posting messages in a ‘class blog’ updated their knowledge of current affairs. Needless to mention students learnt to condense the current news and present them briefly.

Podcast versus Other Web Tools

How far does a podcast differ from other web tools? ‘Pod casting includes web casting, where people listen to files through their computers, and podcasting takes the next step too of pushing sound files to subscribers with portables MP3 players such as the ‘Pod for listening on the go’ (Steve McCarty, 2005). We are aware that a ‘Podcast’ refers to broadcasting an audio file with the help of the software ‘podder’. You require an RSS feed to download the audio file and with

the help of an MP3 you can listen to the podcast that has been uploaded anywhere at any time and at any place.

Collaborative Listening

With this advanced technology it is possible to expose students to a number of listening activities to enhance their oral proficiency. Collaborative work promotes such a training program and it was evident that when students listened to podcasts in groups they could improve their knowledge of the expressions as well as the concepts pertaining to Corporate English.

As a first step, students were asked to log on to various ESL and Corporate English podcasts such as-

www.eltpodcast.com

<http://breakingnewsenglish.com>

<http://englishcaster.com>

www.ikey.podomatic.com

www.esl.about.com/od/englishlistening

Practical Application

To ensure purposeful listening, they were asked to do related activities such as writing a summary of what they had listened to, note down idiomatic expressions and also the language used to express the concepts of requesting, persuading, and negotiating, to list out a few.

To explain further, while the site, www.eltpodcast.com offers theme-based dialogues for ESL/EFL students, the site, <http://breakingnewsenglish.com> presents current events of Corporate English followed by activities, pair work and discussion. The students had to sum up the information provided after listening to the podcast. Of the two sites, <http://englishcaster.com> and www.esl.about.com/od/englishlistening, the former provides a lot of learning experiences pertaining to idiomatic expressions and conversational forms and the latter provides various podcasts for learning and teaching. One of the podcasts, ESL pod provides tags in Corporate English. The students were asked to note down those expressions for their future use. The next site, www.ikey.podomatic.com deals with Corporate English relating to transactions that need interpersonal skills, negotiation skills and so on. The students had to listen to them for learning communication skills.

As a second step, they had to use them in various situations relevant to corporate world. These activities proved to be realistic as most of the expressions are relevant to the learning of the prescribed topics in the curriculum such as Corporate Etiquettes, Adaptability, Interpersonal skills and so on.

Development of Uploading Skills

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Uploading one's own podcast is a worthy experience that students have to be exposed to and it is believed that it would facilitate language learning to a greater extent. Steve McCarty (2005) refers to the growing popularity of podcasting in his article as, 'Greater ease of publishing individual voices that brought a democratized social dimension to the web'. And nowadays podcasting is very easy, as there are sites such as www.podomatic.com and www.odeo.com that provide facility for registering and creating podcasts free of cost.

Final Stage

So, in the final stage of the study a few dialogues prepared by the students were uploaded to the podcast created in the free site, www.podomatic.com. How did we do this? The selected dialogues on 'Adaptability', 'Corporate Etiquette and 'Business Introductions' were recorded and saved as sound files. They were then uploaded to the podcast created.

Using Blogs

With regard to the Blog, most of us know that it is an on-line journal, a web tool used for publishing messages, and which, thus, ensures a healthy experience of sharing views, ideas with everyone. As a few sites, particularly www.blogger.com, offer free space for creating blogs, web publishing has become so popular and is done free of cost.

What else could motivate a teacher to use such an advanced web technology in a language classroom?

I wanted to create a blog for my engineering students for a different purpose. My objective was 'to encourage students to post their summary of current news'.

This would enable the students to update themselves with current news and also answer the objective type test on the same conducted at every semester. A class blog was created in the web site, www.blogger.com with the user name and password for the students to post messages. They worked in groups and gathered news from leading newspapers like *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, *Business News* and *Economic Times*. They played quiz with the available information and in this way updated their knowledge of what was going on around the world. Then the group leaders posted the entire coverage of the weekly news as thematic points by logging onto the blog. It must be pointed out that the students were asked to focus more on business news than general features, as most of the questions in the exam dealt with the former.

Explicit Advantages

Considering the advantages of creating a virtual environment in the classroom. It must be pointed out that

1. Students were exposed to new tools of learning. They were not at all dependent on the course materials or the teacher only, for learning new expressions. It was evident that those who were motivated would certainly access the podcasts regularly and update themselves.
2. Most of them enjoyed the idea of uploading their own podcast, though their dialogues had to be corrected in a few places by the teacher to ensure a fairly satisfactory standard of presentation.
3. They gained confidence in using new expressions as the podcasts served as models for effective communication strategies.
4. Most of them showed improvement in oral communication.
5. They enjoyed listening to native speakers speaking.
6. With blogs they really had the experience of publishing something worthy.

A Worthy Experience, Indeed! And Some Constraints!!

Thus, it should be acknowledged that it was a worthy experience for both the students and me. However, like any study, there were a few constraints, which had to be tackled effectively for conducting this study.

1. Students were permitted to use the Internet facility only one hour per day and so not all students could spend much time listening to the podcasts.
2. Nearly 40% of students had their school education in regional language and so were not confident in writing messages for posting in the blog.
3. The Internet connectivity was quite low most of the times thus posing problems in uploading the sound file to the podcast created. It took a long time to upload every file.
4. Students could not download the podcasts in their mobiles in spite of having MP3 connectivity as accessing the Internet proved to be very expensive. Thus, they had to depend on the facility provided by the institution.
5. Not all had easy access to browsing centers due to their economic background.

Remedial Steps Which Could be Adopted

In order to alleviate the above mentioned challenges the following steps were taken.

1. Students were asked to browse the sites given in browsing centers, make a note of the content to do the related activities. This way I could have a control over their listening task.

2. They were encouraged to work in groups for gathering news items and post the messages.
3. The audio files had to be uploaded in a corporate office.
4. They were asked to post messages in the class blog in the institution itself during their browsing sessions.

To Conclude

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that the flexibility of the curriculum and the cooperation of most of the students made this action research possible. While podcasts promoted effective interaction among students, the blog paved way for web publishing and updating their knowledge of current affairs.

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