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Learning to Communicate Effectively in English through Blended E-Learning

Phillip Towndrow & Christopher Cheers

Abstract

E-learning environments provide English language teachers with additional places to teach and learn. But when learners move online, it is critical for them to be inducted into the frameworks and processes involved in effective teaching and learning with information and communications technology (ICT). In order to illustrate how this might be done, this paper presents a technology-rich lesson outline that could be used with a group of students taking a communications skills course. The authors consider how a standard face-to-face lesson can be transformed by adopting a problem-based learning approach that features a blend of off- and online learning. The materials used show how teachers and students might be able to transcend some of the barriers they may encounter both in, and beyond, the traditional language learning classroom.

Introduction

As educators, we have taught in a range of environments, using a range of tools and media. We work with our students in classrooms, laboratories, workshops and in the field. These places have their own procedures, practices, strengths and weaknesses that we have learnt about over the years. Most recently, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have provided us with an additional place to teach and learn – the e-learning environment. We consider e-learning to be a logical extension to what we have always done as teachers but we also recognize that time and assistance are needed before new behaviours in learning with ICT can be adopted effectively.

Without doubt, a key factor in operating effectively with ICT is the development of online communication skills and strategies. An influential contribution to the literature on computer-mediated communication is from Salmon (2001) who proposes a hierarchical model of educational development and technical training. The steps in Salmon's progression range from initial access and socialisation into an online conferencing system to information exchange, knowledge construction and finally the development of learners as reflectors on, and evaluators of, their work. That said, our experiences of working with participants online indicates that

it is vital for them to realise that it is in their best interests to share information and co-operate with each other. These values can be taught by: (a) recognising that the nature of teacher guidance online is critical to the success of activities; (b) ensuring that tasks and/or activities are well planned, interesting and assessed appropriately; and (c) providing students with a wide range of interactions and learning experiences.

To illustrate these points, this paper presents a technology-rich lesson outline that could be used with a group of students taking a communications skills course. Our exploratory approach considers how a standard face-to-face lesson, planned to present and practice oral and written interpersonal communication skills, can be transformed into an alternative sequence of activities that has the potential to engage the interest and involvement of learners through ICT. Our proposal serves to demonstrate one way in which the latter stages of Salmon's (2001) model can be achieved through a blend of off- and online learning. Through the adoption of blended e-learning, we also seek to show how teachers and students might be able to transcend some of the barriers they may encounter both in, and beyond, the traditional language learning classroom.

Successful English Language Learning Online

In order to get the most out of ICT, teachers need to do more than just provide additional opportunities for language practice. This is particularly true in contexts where communication is characterised as a "... symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings" (Lustig & Koester, 1993: 25).

All too often, online discussions are framed around the bare prompt of "discuss this topic". Alternatively, teachers need to provide learners with exposure to a wider range of opportunities for interaction and reflection. For this to occur, there needs to be a clear purpose for the interactions that are envisaged. Communication is a two-way process that involves feedback, negotiation, and the building and sharing of meanings. If students are to develop communication skills suitable for their lives as professionals, then this needs to be mirrored in the educational design of learning activities. Furthermore, educational task designers need to remember that meaning and communication protocols can, and do, change with context. As we will show below, a method that can provide the scaffolding and a rich range of opportunities for developing language and communication skills in context, is problem-based learning (PBL).

Effective Online Facilitation for Language Learning

One of the essential steps to effective language learning has been to minimise the amount of time teachers spend talking in class. The purpose here is to encourage learners to use the target language at maximal levels and it applies equally well

to online learning. To do this well, the online teacher needs to take on the role of facilitator or coach.

Teachers often guide students through activities in the face-to-face classroom by giving explanations and providing feedback. When learners move online, teacher guidance must continue in order for the frameworks and processes involved in effective teaching and learning with ICT to be learnt. These objectives can be achieved, in part, by clearly spelling out the objectives of activities and making the steps for achieving these objectives explicit.

Activity Design

We maintain, then, that learning needs to be situated in professional practice for optimal results to be achieved. Triggers for discussion, therefore, need to be engaging and tasks need to be designed with clear stages to work through with deliverables required at the end of each stage. For activities to mirror real-world work processes, it is necessary for them to span several learning sessions.

When learners play authentic, active roles in carrying out complex tasks using ICT, we have a compelling situation for fostering language and communications skill development. PBL provides students with opportunities to grapple with realistic, ill-structured problems as if they were problem-solvers in the professional realm. Thus, by designing instruction in this way, students are required to:

- analyse problems
- brainstorm ideas
- identify learning issues
- collaborate as members of a team
- conduct research
- peer teach
- present findings

Implementing a Blended PBL Approach

There are advantages to both face-to-face and online learning environments. But as Laurillard (1996) points out, "A mix of teaching and learning methods will always be the most efficient way to support student learning, because only then is it possible to embrace all the activities of discussion, interaction, adaptation and reflection, which ... are essential for academic learning". This is particularly so with language and communication skills development. A blended approach allows us to focus on all modes of communication involved in realising learning tasks. One way to arrange a sequence of learning activities in blended PBL is shown in Table 1.

The final decision on the type of blending used in an English language lesson should be based on the nature and complexity of the activities involved and their desired learning outcomes. Effective blended learning requires careful preparation

Table 1.
A suggested sequence of activities for blended PBL.

1. Face-to-face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. read a case study b. analyse and define the problem c. generate questions and learning issues d. allocate research tasks
2. Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. conduct research b. share findings c. propose and justify solution(s) d. prepare to write a report of findings
3. Face-to-face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. presentation of solution(s) with written report

and an awareness of factors that are critical to successful task design. Let us turn to exploring these points by showing how a face-to-face lesson in oral and written interpersonal communication skills can be transformed into a blended sequence of activities that is designed to engage the interest and involvement of learners through ICT.

Standard Face-to-Face Plan

<i>Level:</i>	High intermediate
<i>Age:</i>	Late teenage and upwards
<i>Context:</i>	Technical communication skills for engineering students preparing for, or just beginning, a tertiary-level course; 24 students on roster.
<i>Time:</i>	90 minutes
<i>Equipment and materials:</i>	Video cassette player and TV, computer and data-projector with screen, electronic slide software, role-play cue cards, photocopied handouts and tests, pen and paper.
<i>Objective:</i>	By the end of the lesson, students will be able to list factors relating to effective oral communication.

Procedure

1. Students are told that employers often complain that young people cannot communicate effectively in speech or writing. To illustrate this point, they watch a humorous scene from a local television sitcom where misleading instructions have disastrous consequences for members of the hapless cast. Teacher asks general comprehension questions. [10 minutes]
2. Teacher runs through an electronic slide presentation on how to avoid oral miscommunication. A print out of the slides is given to students to follow and remember. [25 minutes]

3. Teacher distributes a model conversation between a factory technician and a supervisor. Teacher explains vocabulary and grammar used in highlighted sentences. [10 minutes]
4. Teacher administers a cloze test based on material presented in Stages 1 and 2. [15 minutes]
5. Students are arranged into groups of four and given role cards describing work scenarios in a local computer software office. Group members act out their assigned parts. Teacher monitors conversations and makes notes. [15 minutes]
6. Teacher corrects speech and grammar from previous stage, then repeats the need to use correct English in order to communicate effectively. [15 minutes]
7. Students write out conversations practiced in Stage 4 for homework. Teacher subsequently grades these for accuracy and application of points presented in the lesson.

Commentary on the Standard Face-to-Face Plan

Although the standard face-to-face lesson plan involves a considerable amount of preparation on the part of the teacher, unfortunately it typifies a rather flat, uninspiring mode of interaction that places a premium on accurate performance and the unquestioned acceptance of content from an expert source. The lesson involves the use of educational technology, but sadly, it is under the exclusive control of the teacher. Ultimately, instruction of this nature (however well-intentioned) could do students a disservice by presenting a false picture of social interaction as structured and fixed. The mode of presentation and practice used favours a one-size-fits-all mentality to problem-solving that is restricting and dependent on a particular context. Let us now consider an alternative approach to the teaching and learning of interpersonal communication skills and strategies that employs a blended PBL approach.

Blended PBL Sequence of Activities

<i>Level:</i>	High intermediate
<i>Age:</i>	Late teenage and upwards
<i>Context:</i>	Technical communication skills for engineering students preparing for, or just beginning, a tertiary-level course; 24 students on roster.
<i>Time:</i>	105 minutes in class, online work unspecified
<i>Equipment and materials:</i>	Access to networked, web-enabled, multimedia computers, word-processing software, pen and paper.
<i>Objectives:</i>	Students write and present a report proposing ways in which channels of communication between management and office-floor workers can be enriched.

Things at Wellbach Information Services, a medium-sized, private enterprise in Southeast Asia, are not going very well. Productivity is down, morale is low and key technical staff have recently resigned. The company risks closure unless there is an improvement in the next quarter's bottom line. The Director of Human Resources at Wellbach, Mr. Queso, has identified interpersonal communications as an area for immediate change. Your job as members of the "Mystic" Work Improvement Team (WIT) is to propose ways in which this can be done.

Fig. 1. A case-based scenario for blended PBL.

Procedure

1. Teacher welcomes the class and explains that they will be engaged in a series of activities that builds on previous input sessions on the language of making recommendations (e.g. "should + action" "The company should hire more secretarial staff") and writing a report that recommends strategies. The case-based scenario in Fig. 1 is outlined. [5 minutes]
2. Preliminary research (face-to-face): Students are grouped into fours and invited to explore their stock of general knowledge and experiences relating to the factors that lead to breakdowns in interpersonal communication. They check what they know with information that is available on the World Wide Web. Group findings are presented to the class and this could be orchestrated through a downloadable template prepared by the teacher. [40 minutes]
3. Online collaboration and discussion. Students read a text (see Appendix 1) about communication issues at Wellbach (a fictional information services company). They then participate in an online exchange of views to determine what happened at the company from various points of view (see Appendix 2). Some further online research may also be necessary. The discussion closes with preliminary recommendations about what the members of staff at Wellbach should do. [Asynchronously over 1–2 weeks]
4. Problem resolution (face-to-face): Presentation of solutions to the problem set in Stage 2. This takes the form of oral discourse leading to finalisation of a written report recommending strategies to be adopted by senior management at Wellbach. Follow-up assessment of the group-written report (and further language work derived from it) is based on a rubric derived from Breland *et al.* (1987) that values, appropriate discourse, mechanics, practicality and participation (see Appendix 3). [60 minutes]

Commentary on the Blended PBL Approach

Clearly, adopting a blended PBL approach takes longer. However, we would maintain that this additional time is justified because there is a lot more "process-learning" work being done that could inspire interaction. That is, in blended PBL, students have the opportunity to work beyond the exclusive control of the teacher and experience the dynamics of sharing knowledge, choosing what is important,

understanding the implications of decisions made and implementing a plan of action.

In Stage 1 of the sequence, students are primed for the opportunities to interact that follow. It is important to stress at this point that learning should be linked to previous experiences as well as those to come. In this way, the purposes of learning tasks can be made explicit and shown to be relevant to the students' realm of professional practice. Throughout Stage 2, students are expected to analyse and define problems for themselves. As they proceed in completing the deliverable (i.e. the presentation of research findings), they should be guided by the teacher to negotiate the meaning of the tasks ahead in order to understand two key points. First, that all members of the team must be involved because the tasks cannot be performed by individuals working alone. Second, that a solution (or a set of solutions) can, and should, be found to the emerging problem(s) under consideration as this will provide valuable language learning practice.

The third stage is critical to the success of the blended PBL approach. It is likely that productivity levels will rise, and there will be value added to language learning through ICT, when at least two issues are addressed. First, the manner in which student participation in online discussions is measured and assessed can influence the effectiveness of debates where multiple points of view are examined and knowledge is constructed jointly. Clearly, for the best results to be achieved, a premium should be placed on the quality of postings that are relevant to the topic of discussion, clarity of expression and ability take into account the needs and opinions of others. For a more detailed discussion of assessing the effectiveness of student participation in online discussions, see Edelstein & Edwards (2002).

Second, participants must come to see that it is in their best interests to share information and co-operate with each other in the preparation of the Points of View sheet (Appendix 2). As confidence in online postings increase, so it is hoped that greater feelings of independence in learning with ICT will be fostered. Clearly, blended PBL benefits from the transfer of skills from one context to another and the quicker online teachers can reach the stage where knowledge is constructed both off- and online, the better things will be for all concerned.

The final stage of the sequence should celebrate the students' success in completing the set tasks. It is also an opportunity for them to reflect on their performance and to comment, in particular, on the quality and usefulness of the student-to-student interactions that occurred face-to-face and online. Teachers should make all attempts to defer judgement on the quality of the material presented in class. Rather, the point here should be to provide a context where meanings can be shared and communications skills can be honed based on the reactions of an attentive audience.

Conclusion

In closing, this paper set out to show that a blend of off- and online learning could provide an effective, value-added platform for teaching communications skills

that is illustrative of the latter stages of Salmon's (2001) five-step model of educational development and technical training in computer-mediated communication. Progress in this direction, we believe, is possible by questioning teacher-centred approaches that place a premium on accurate performance and the unquestioned acceptance of material. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that social interaction is complex and dependent upon context. Ultimately, we should be warned against the limitations of standardising approaches and suggesting to learners that there is only one way to solve their communication difficulties. The pedagogical implications for implementing a blended PBL approach in English language learning can be summarised as follows:

- Instead of instructing students to discuss topics in general terms, teachers should provide specific purposes for the interactions that have clear stages and reflect professionally relevant (real-world) contexts.
- All teachers need to learn (and should seek training in) effective facilitation in computer-mediated conferencing (see Salmon (2001) for further details).
- When language learning tasks are designed, they should allow students to experience the dynamics of sharing knowledge and require deliverable items at the end of each stage.
- Teachers can provide time for "process-learning" work by exploiting the flexibility that is possible through asynchronous e-learning.
- Point of View debates can provide opportunities for students to learn how to take account of the needs and opinions of others.
- Teachers should resist the temptation to measure and assess students' work at every turn; a learning-centred approach to assessment is advocated where students are encouraged to judge their own success based on the reactions of their peers.

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Appendix 1

Communication Patterns at Wellbach Information Services

The following events occurred recently at Wellbach Information Services and illustrate just how members of staff communicate with each other.

Sam is an information science student working on a short attachment with Wellbach. At 09:15 on Monday he received an urgent e-mail message from his supervisor, Mr. Mandon who wanted a stock check of consumables used in the back-office to be done and an on-going inventory of such items to be maintained. These requests caused Sam to ponder, momentarily. He recalled doing a Diploma module on MS Access last semester but the lecturer had never mentioned consumable items and back-office inventories. *So what to do?* Sam thought. Well, he answered a few other e-mails from friends and called his sister on his mobile phone. A couple of days passed and Mr Mandon had still not told him how to do the stock check, so perhaps it wasn't that urgent after all.

On Friday afternoon, Sam got a call to go to Mr. Mandon's office. He was busy doing next year's budget proposal and wanted to know how many back-up tapes for the server to order. Sam said he had no idea. Suddenly, Mr. Mandon's face went red with rage and reprimanded the student for not having the database ready. Sam kept silent. He'd forgotten all about it and the fact that the server used tapes was news to him, anyway.

A week later Sam received a letter telling him that his attachment with Wellbach was terminated. *What a bunch of losers*, he told his friends later.

Appendix 2***Online Collaboration and Discussion – Points of View Debate***

Student's PoV What did Sam do or not do? What were his attitudes?	Supervisor's PoV What did Mr. Mandon do or not do? What were his attitudes?	Your PoV What do you think about Sam's actions and attitudes? How about Mr. Mandon's actions and attitudes?

Appendix 3

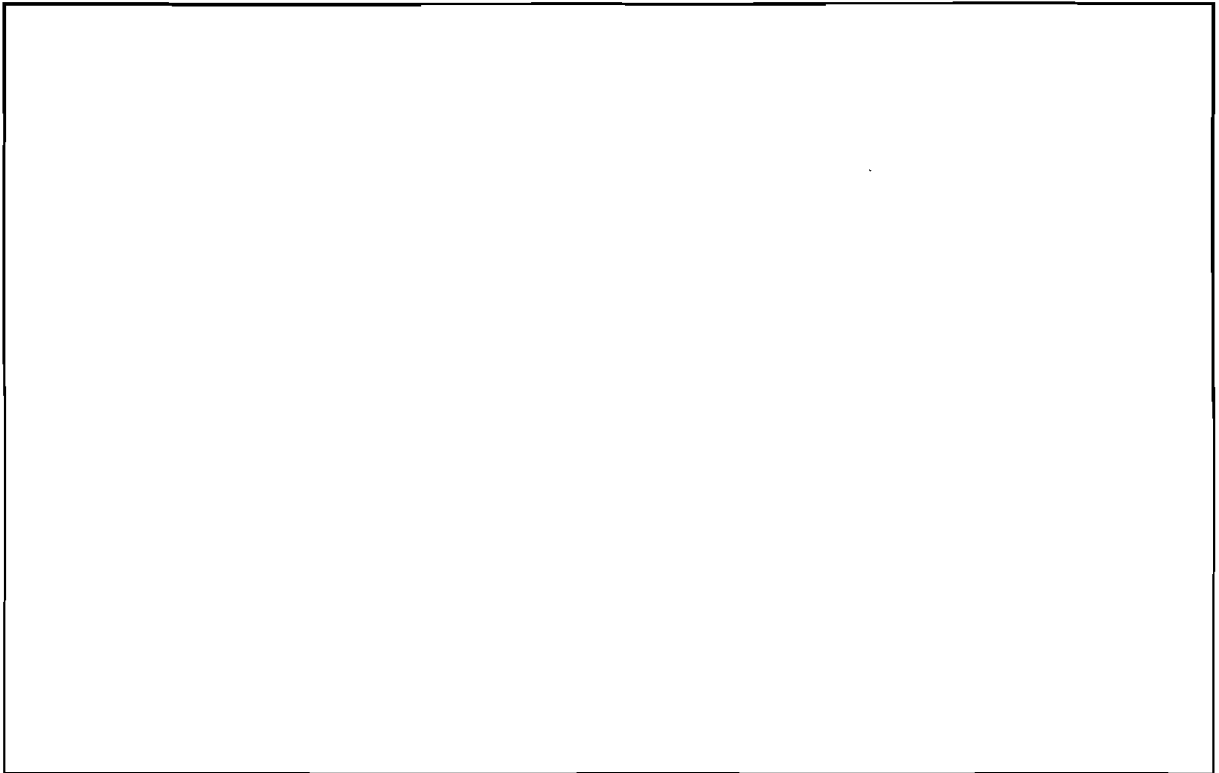
Rubric for Assessing the Effectiveness of Group Report Writing

Group members' names	1. _____
	2. _____
	3. _____

	1	2	3	4	5	Points
Discourse	no criteria apply	few criteria apply	some criteria apply	most criteria apply	all criteria apply	
Mechanics	no criteria apply	few criteria apply	some criteria apply	most criteria apply	all criteria apply	
Practicality	no criteria apply	few criteria apply	some criteria apply	most criteria apply	all criteria apply	
Participation	no criteria apply	few criteria apply	some criteria apply	most criteria apply	all criteria apply	
Total:						

Key

Discourse	Mechanics	Practicality	Participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ability to organise thoughts • appropriate sentence structures • supporting material provided • ideas expressed logically • effective transitions • coherence and unity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grammatical accuracy • spelling • punctuation • capitalisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear and precise purpose • opinions stated clearly and are relevant • appreciation of problems • realistic solutions proposed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • submitted on time • appropriate length • evidence of teamwork

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