Using a Wordpress.com Site With College Classes: Recommendations and Benefits

Stephen Burrow

The Internet provides plenty of opportunities to improve language skills in a large number of different ways. Teachers can harness it for use in the classroom and also to motivate their students for autonomous learning.

This paper provides a number of recommendations for the setting up and running of a website using Wordpress, a well-known blogging platform, and how one can be used both inside and outside the classroom. While the actual setting-up of a website on Wordpress is relatively easy, there are a number of tips that can make it much easier to upkeep the site, post video clips from the web, choose links and do other things that can make the site much more interesting and beneficial for students.

The website is used in two main ways. Firstly, in speaking classes to provide authentic listening practice as homework using embedded videos. In addition, it was used as a hub to provide students with opportunities for autonomous learning via links posted on the site.

The address of the website that is referred to in this paper is www. stepenglish.org. The site previously could be found at http://www.listeninenglish. wordpress.com, and either address works.

Background: What Wordpress Is and Is Not

Wordpress is primarily a blogging platform and thus is not specifically designed with education in mind. It cannot be compared to education-specific, blended learning software platforms, such as Moodle, which is a course or class management system. According to the Wordpress website, it serves a simple purpose, which is to "create a beautiful website or blog".

There are a number of other blogging platforms which can be used to set up a similar website, but Wordpress was chosen over Blogger or Edublogs for its ease of use, especially when posting videos. Previously, a platform called Ning, which is a private social network, was used, but this was found to be unsatisfactory. Wordpress has the advantages of being easier to use, and due to its flexibility can be suitable for displaying a large number of links to other websites useful for language learning on the Internet.

It must be noted that there are two different versions of Wordpress which are designed for slightly different needs. Firstly, there is Wordpress.org, which is a downloadable software platform. This has advantages because it is much more customizable in many areas, such as site layout. However, using this means you have to organize your own server which can be expensive and unreliable if you want to sometimes use your website in a large class where all the students are accessing it at the same time. The alternative is Wordpress.com, which is hosted by the Wordpress company itself, giving the advantage of a professional server system. Therefore, a college class can all simultaneously access your site without any problems. The website that this paper refers to uses the Wordpress.com platform.

2

Purposes of the Website

When building the website using Wordpress, there were a number of functions that it was intended to provide:

1. Authentic Listening Practice

One major purpose of the website is to provide students with an opportunity to practice listening to natural spoken English, i.e. authentic materials.

There is a commonly made distinction between authentic and non-authentic listening materials used for language learners. Authentic materials are not designed specifically for the purpose of language teaching but instead have been produced for the purpose of genuine communication (Nunan, 1999:81). It must be noted that the distinction between native and non-native speakers of English does not apply here. Non-native speaker communication is equally authentic as that of a native-speaker; it is the purpose of the communication that gives it authenticity. Conversely, Peacock (1999) defines non-authentic materials as being specifically for language learners. This distinction is important because one of the major purposes of setting up the website described in this paper was to provide opportunities for listening to *authentic* materials. Improvements in technology in the last fifteen years, have meant that it is much easier to find challenging and motivational, authentic materials on the world wide web.

The immediate advantage of using authentic materials is that they are real English both linguistically and culturally. Wardman (2009) outlines another benefit, which is that they can increase students' confidence and, in a sense,

empower them. Another major advantage is that authentic materials are often culturally more interesting, as well as being culturally and linguistically up to date. It is easily possible to find suitable, authentic material on an event that has happened in the same week as any class taught.

Great care should be taken to ensure that the materials used are not at too high of a level, as this can have an adverse effect on student motivation. Most language learners, when constantly exposed to material that they perceive of as too difficult, be it either reading or listening texts, suffer a decrease in confidence, and hence the motivation to improve their language skills. The difficulty of material can be very difficult to judge as all language learners are different, but certain criteria, such as speed of speech and amount of vocabulary, can provide pointers to what is too challenging or not.

2. Resource Hub

The Internet contains a large number of websites that can be used to improve language skills. Some of these are specifically designed for language learners, but often with other sites this is not the case. By providing a large number of easily visible and accessible links on the website, students have the opportunity to use the Internet to improve their language skills. Hence, the site acts as a resource hub, and it is up to the individual learner which links they use and how often they do so. The links on the website are divided into the following categories:

Things to Watch ― websites of television and visual media organisations in English-speaking countries, such as the BBC, National Geographic and Reuters.

Listening ― links to non-visual listening material, for example podcasts and

4

radio sites. Some of the podcasts have non-authentic materials designed with language learners in mind.

English on the Web － these links are for websites, such as the British Council and Voice of America, which are designed to help with all four language skills. Sometimes, these organisations have sites specifically for language learners.

Vocabulary － links to vocabulary-specific sites, some of which test vocabulary knowledge and some more oriented to the recycling of existing vocabulary.

Writing － some sites, such as 280 Daily and Penzu are designed for writing a journal online. As writing is a productive skill, there are only a small number of suitable sites in this category.

Reading － links to sites for online reading, including newspapers or other more general sites, such as Wikipedia in Easy English.

Grammar － websites for students to practice and review their knowledge of grammar.

Speaking － there is a shortage of useful sites to practice speaking, mainly due to a lack of interactive technology to provide for two-way communication. Some sites, such as Voxi and Voxopop allow students to record their speaking. Others, for instance Prezi, can help with presentations.

Easy English － websites with material at an elementary level.

TOEIC/TOEFL/IELTS ― some websites useful for students interested in these tests.

Teacher Links ― a few sites for English language teachers.

3. A Key to Autonomous Learning

Undoubtedly, it takes a major investment in time and effort to be able to successfully learn a foreign language, and autonomous learning, or self-study, is at least as important as formal instruction. Therefore, one duty of language teachers should be to help guide learners to study autonomously in efficient and beneficial ways. It is important for the learners to be highly motivated in order to do this.

Motivation can be a difficult construct to pinpoint and define, but at some time most language teachers can safely say that they have experienced problems with low motivation levels with their students. Schaefer (2010) calls motivation difficult to define, and Crooks and Schmitt (1991) make the point that motivation is often written about in general terms as opposed to a more precise definition. Kelly (2011) describes motivation as a soft construct and difficult to observe directly. The key for autonomous learning is that motivation must continue over a long time scale for a language learner to be successful. However, technology, and especially the Internet, can be a formidable tool to improve language-learner motivation. Online, there are a wider range of visual and interactive activities and websites which can have a positive effect on motivation.

Whether autonomy or motivation comes first is a disputed question. Wachob (2011) notes that autonomy and motivation are seen as inextricably

entwined. In a study about motivation and learner autonomy among university students in Hong Kong, Spratt, Humphries & Chan (2000) concluded that there was some doubt as to which came first. The major weakness in these kinds of studies is that of time scale. In order to successfully learn a language, it takes far longer than the time frame of studies like these. However, learner autonomy must be seen as an important goal, and encouraging learner autonomy must surely help students' motivation to learn and be successful.

Advice on Setting up and Running a Wordpress Website

1. Use Firefox.

Firefox may not be the quickest browser, but it is currently the most convenient to use with Wordpress because there is a degree of integration between the two. Most importantly, Firefox has a "post to Wordpress" button/ widget which you can drag into the browser toolbar. This means that you can directly post videos you find online to your website. If you do so, make sure you type something into the description (you can easily edit it later), otherwise it can be difficult to write into your post later.

2. Use Vodpod.

Vodpod is a video-clip storage website, which can be used to keep your videos for use later and is also integrated with Wordpress. This means videos stored on it can be directly posted to Wordpress. It also acts as a back up for any videos you have on your Wordpress site. The Vodpod smart phone application for smartphones is also very useful and has the same function.

3. Use the Wordpress Smartphone Application

This is free to download and use for iPhones and Android, and is very

useful for keeping up with comments posted by students, especially those who do their homework just before a class.

4. Site Statistics

Wordpress can show you your website statistics, so it is possible to approximately know how many of your class looked at their homework. The site statistics show you how many people accessed your site, when they did so and what they viewed.

5. YouTube Link

It is a good idea to put a YouTube link under and embedded video you post. Some students use their phones to watch the clips, and on some phones, such as the iPhone, viewing video clips which require Flash is impossible.

6. Embedding

Sometimes, there is a user block on embedding video clips for copyright or other reasons. Some media organisations, such as the BBC, operate strict copyright guidelines. It might be possible to find the same, or a similar clip, on YouTube, or the organization might have a YouTube channel of its own allowing for easy embedding. Failing these, it is of course possible to put up the link with no embedding, although by doing so you lose the visual impact of having an embedded video.

7. Transcripts

Some sites have transcripts, such as Reuters Video and Newsy, which are very helpful for language learners. It is easy to put the transcript in the comments or use it to provide a handout. In the future, it seems likely that transcription of video will become automatic as technology improves. Indeed

Google provides this service on some YouTube videos now, but the transcripts are, at present, too unreliable to be used.

8. Keywords

One of the difficulties faced by language learners when confronted by authentic, natural English spoken by native speakers is the wide range of vocabulary used. This can be offset somewhat by providing keywords and requiring them to be checked before the video is watched. This can also be also a useful way of increasing vocabulary.

9. Comments

As Wordpress is a blogging platform, it has an excellent comments system. This can be used to show the answers to any questions posted about the video and can quickly be checked after viewing. The comments can also be used to give and receive feedback from both students and the teacher.

10. Links

One of the purposes of www.stepenglish.org is to provide language learners with a self-study resource. At present there are approximately 80 links that can be accessed on the right-hand side of the site. These are arranged into categories, such as reading, vocabulary and things to watch. It is perhaps best to try and avoid websites which are commercial and those which require registeration, but often the quality of these is better than free ones, and they have less advertising. Using a secondary e-mail address is recommended for any sites that require a valid address for registering.

11. Layout

The layout or presentation of any website is important. Wordpress has lots

of different themes, but www.stepenglish.org uses a three-column one, mainly so as to be able to use two of the columns to show the various links on the website prominently. This means that a user does not have to scroll down very far to be able to see the links.

12. Privacy

Wordpress has the option to turn off search engines, so theoretically it is a closed community. However, if complete privacy is required up to 35 users can register for free. If there are need a private network for over that number, the cost is 30 US dollars per year. The alternative would be one site per class you teach, assuming there are 35 or fewer students. Wordpress allows you to save an XML file onto your computer hard drive and then upload that data onto a site with a different name in Wordpress or another blogging platform, thereby creating the same site with a different name and web address.

13. Multiple Classes

A website can be used with more than one class. Some students watch videos for other classes, enjoy them and learn something.

14. Be Contemporary

Use video clips that are up to date because they can be interesting and have a positive effect on notivation.

15. Do Not Overuse in the Classroom

It must emphasised that the website is not used that much inside the classroom but as a back up or complement to classes. Teachers should be wary of falling into the trap where technology is used to show off - technology as a pose. Any use of a website must be beneficial to the students in the class.

Conclusion

The website www.stepenglish.org has been interesting and rewarding as a teacher to set up and run. Judging from the feedback in class, in the comments on the site and from the site statistics, students have enjoyed the material posted and accessed the links in their own time. It is hoped that the site can be improved and that it will continue to serve its purposes as outlined in this paper.

References

Crookes, G., & Schmidt, R. (1991). *Motivation: Reopening the research agenda.* Language Learning, 41(4), 469-512.

Curtis, K. (2009). *Review of Traditional and Current Theories of Motivation in ESL* Retrieved from http://www.osaka-gu.ac.jp/php/kelly/papers/motivation.html

Kilickaya. F. (2004). *Authentic materials and cultural content in EFL classrooms.* The Internet TESL Journal, 10 (7). Retrieved from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Kilickaya-AutenticMaterial.html

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning.* Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.

Peacock, M. (1997). *The effect of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL learners.* ELT Journal, 51:2.

Schaefer, E. (2010). *Teacher Motivation: The Missing Link in ESL Motivational Studies.* Journal of Ochanomizu University English Society, 1: 43-52.

Spratt M., Humphreys G., and Chan V. 2002 *Autonomy and motivation: which comes first?* Language Teaching Research July 2002 vol. 6 no. 3 245-266.

Wardman C. (2009). *Authentic materials in English Language Teaching; Are they as important as we think?* MATSDA Folio, 13 (2) p 14-17.

Wachob, P. (2011). Using Videos of Students in the Classroom to Enhance Learner Autonomy *Teaching English with Technology,* 11 (2), 18-28. Retrieved from http://www.tewtjournal.org.

Wordpress. Retrieved from http://wordpress.org/