

Using a BBS in a High School Writing Class

Walsh, Matthew (Ikeda High School attached to Osaka Kyoiku University)

Key Words : ELT, High School, Writing, Internet, BBS, Learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

Chances for free production, or ‘Comprehensible Output’ (Swain, 1995) are lacking in the typical high school ELT curriculum in Japan (Walsh, forthcoming), but are necessary to foster fluency, and can ‘stretch’ interlanguage, by giving opportunities to test hypothesis and notice gaps in knowledge, explicit or implicit (Swain, 1997.). Integrating PCs and the Internet into a writing course opens a myriad of possibilities for this type of output. However, because of the very vastness of options available, the process is often hard to control and manage. The course that will be described uses a free BBS internet-based software. Creating interactivity is one challenge. As a practice for fluency, another issue is finding classroom procedures that produce more learner-writing within the given time of the class period. It was found that short texts to be read before writing commenced fulfilled both of these functions. Finally, knowledge acquired about utilizing resources and reference materials on the Internet were seen to foster ‘learner autonomy’ (Benson & Voller, 1997). The procedures utilized in the course and emergent trouble areas will be explained with the hope that fellow language teachers may find something of practical value.

2. Procedures

2.1 Setting up the Computer Environment

The open-source browser [Mozilla Seamonkey](#) was downloaded and installed on each computer for two reasons. One is that with tab browsing, the set of pages used in the course can be set as the home page, saving time by eliminating the need for the learner to navigate to each one separately during class (see figure 1 below)

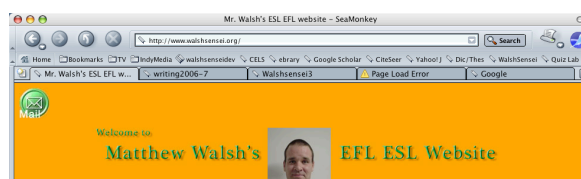


Figure 1. Seamonkey's home page contains tabs with all the pages used in class.

Along the same lines, Seamonkey remembers the passwords for the BBS and Quiz software used, again saving time. In order to save time downloading the installer itself, a copy was placed in the shared folder of the server and students dragged this to their desktop. Some school servers do not allow users to install software but often installation of major open source software like Seamonkey is permissible. Our server would allow installation but then erase the software at shutdown leaving the user preferences in tact. For this reason, at the beginning of every class, students needed to re-install Seamonkey, but this was very quick and all the preferences were restored after that.

Next, the students needed to register for the BBS [Invision Powerboard](#), which was the main software used for this course. User names were specified to correspond to class and student attendance number, thus '403' was class 4, student 3. The '0' in '403' is necessary so that the member list when viewed by the instructor will be in order enabling the instructor to use the data for grading by pasting it into a spreadsheet file. 'Number of posts' was used a general indicator of participation in the class, although other data, like number of words written is not available. (See Figure. 2, below)









Member List								
Name	Level	Group	Joined	Posts	Email	AOL	ICQ	Photo
000	■	Members	23-April 06	0				
101	■	Members	19-May 06	1				
102	■	Members	28-April 06	4				
103	■	Members	28-April 06	2				
104	■	Members	28-April 06	3				
105	■	Members	28-April 06	3				
106	■	Members	28-April 06	2				
107	■	Members	28-April 06	2				

Figure 2. Member list from *Invision Powerboard*

When students register, they enter an email address for password recovery that can be used by the instructor to send bulk email (limited to once a week) for announcing topics, and according to the settings from the administrator (the instructor), users (students) may be allowed to send mails to each other. However, this feature was distractive and so disabled.

The board can be set to require registration before use in order to prevent anonymous vandalizing and can also be set to completely disallow non-members entry after the students have all registered.

Preceding all of this, the instructor by creating (registering) a new board becomes the administrator. The process of creating a new board is simple, but the functions available to the instructor as administrator of the board need to be studied by the instructor beforehand.

Passwords for another online software, [Quizlab](#), were also assigned, but for sake of brevity, details will not be explained.

2.2 Classroom Procedures: The Search for Interactive Tasks That Create Maximum Output

Once the actual class had started, several frameworks were experimented with in a sort of trial and error process, which will be explained. The goal was to find procedures that would create interactivity, a maximum volume of output during the 50 minute class periods, and maintain motivation or personal involvement.

The first attempt involved collecting topics suggested by the students, choosing common ones and creating corresponding forums on the BBS for students to write on by either posting an opinion or replying to what a peer had posted. Nine were chosen.

There were several problems with this. One was that students created very short texts with an average of 21 words from a sample of 10 posts. The topics the students suggested were rather simple, such as *“What do you think about school uniforms?”* and lead to short answers such as *“I think we need uniform, because we do not need to think which clothes I should wear”*. A valid opinion perhaps, but not the kind of volume needed if improving fluency was to be a goal of the activity. Also, having posted their opinion on a given topic, there was little impetus to read others opinions or to follow up in the true Q & A fashion of a BBS. Initially, it was hoped that there would be longer exchanges between students through the BBS, but instead most entries were simply in reaction to the topic question, and replies were often of an empty nature such as *“I think so too.”* Furthermore it was difficult to discern which opinions such replies were in response to since all of the students were posting at the same time, near the end of the class period, and monitoring the number of views of the topics revealed that students hadn't been further accessing the BBS from home.

It was decided to create a single, longer text that students would read before writing and then have them post their thoughts in reaction to its content. It was thought that a longer text would have more facets to react to and raise levels of output. An online quiz was set up to aid in comprehension of the text. [The text](#) describes the current humanitarian crises in Darfur, Sudan, a topic that aligned well with the goals of another class the students were participating in, integrated studies.

The text did create longer responses, but only slightly; an average of 31 words up from 21, and the content of the posts weren't very comprehensive in relation to the issues raised in the text. This perhaps indicated that the content of the text was too complicated for the learners to deal with. A perhaps more significant issue contributing to the shortness of the learner's texts was that by the time the students had digested the long text and done the quiz, there was only about 15 minutes left for them to come up with a response. A sample response: *“I think it is very difficult problem. Sudan's government is bad! I think China and Russia think only money!! So they should change!!”*

To shorten the pre-writing phase of the class it was decided to next create [a shorter text](#) for students to react to and not use the quiz software to aid in comprehension, but rather supply a short verbal explanation of the text. The topic chosen was one widely covered in the media, the territorial dispute between Japan and Korea over 'Takeshima' or 'Dokdo' as it is referred to by Korea. After the text was explained there were 35 minutes left for writing. This, in combination with the familiarity of the

issue and the fact that for the first time, text length was specified by the instructor (150 words), led to much longer learner texts, an average of 139 words. A sample text is below (Figure 3).

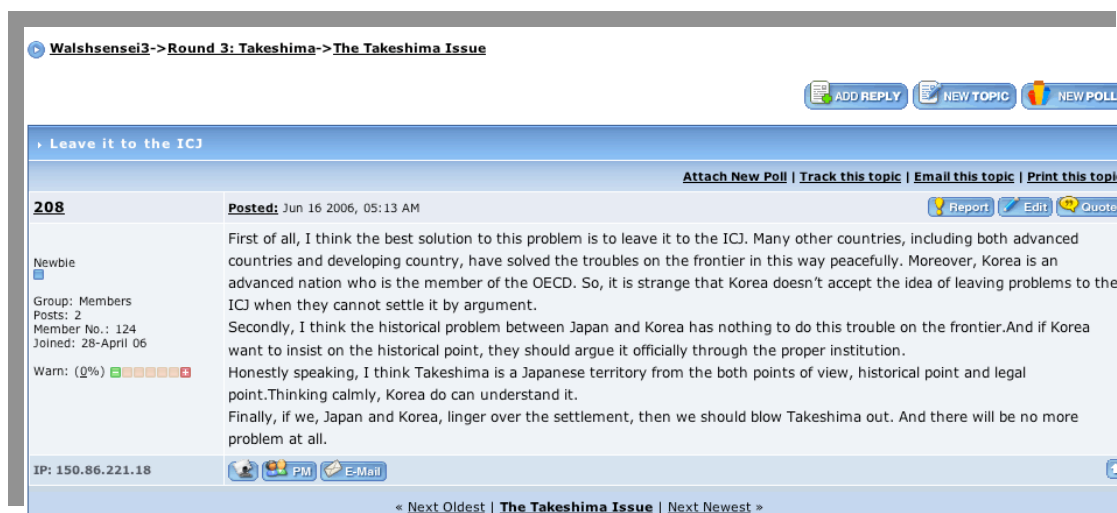


Figure 3. Sample learner text from the 'Takeshima' topic

3 Learner Strategies Observed in Class

In preparation for writing on the BBS, students were observed developing several interesting strategies in preparation for writing. The instructor then shared these with other classes in the hope that they may also wish to adopt them. One was to briefly discuss and share knowledge and opinions on the topic with students seated nearby. Another was to look at what previous classes had written on the topic on the BBS. Finally searching the Internet for ideas was productive but time consuming so it was suggested that the Japanese [Wikipedia](#), site might offer the best summation of any topic or issue and be fairly reliable in terms of accuracy and neutrality.

Other strategies were observed after writing had commenced. Some students were writing on *Word* before pasting their text on the BBS. The spell checking function was useful as well as the word count function. This became particularly useful after word counts had been specified (see section 2.2). Another interesting strategy was to paste the whole instructor-written topic-explanation text into the BBS writing pane and so it could be referred to without clicking back and forth and so that words or phrases could be borrowed when crafting their own text.

Finally, it was observed that students were experimenting with online dictionaries and translation software. As any language teacher who uses the computer room knows, the translation sites are a nightmare and produce barely legible language, the longer the text to be translated, the more nonsense produced. However, simply telling learners not to use such resources seemed and expecting them to obey seemed unrealistic so the instructor did two things: actually find a student text produced by the translation software and point out to the class that it didn't make very much sense and then suggest that if they wanted to use it, it would probably be more reliable at the word or phrase level, but probably not with multi-clause sentences. Also it was suggested not to use the popular but troubled translation site

[Excite](#), but try bilingual dictionary sites like [Goo](#), or even more so [Ejira](#), which is rather useful because it has by far the most collocations and parallel-translated example sentences.

4. Learner Autonomy

The strategies developed by the students and the pre-writing research techniques utilizing resources and reference materials on the Internet are all indicative of the learner autonomy that can be fostered by using the computer lab for language learning. Benson & Voller (1997) provide one definition of learner autonomy, "...a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self directed learning" and Holmes and Ramos (1991) speaking more of the learning process in general point out "it is important to help (learners) to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use". Furthermore, concerning the use of computers and internet resources, it certainly can be said that for the learner who will go on to use their foreign language in any capacity, the future will see more, not less opportunities where skills such as these will become an advantage to have not only for learning but also for written foreign language production in general. In order to develop these skills, the learner needs to be given time to create his or her own set of reliable resources and strategies. From the experiences outlined above, it can be seen that there was a clear advantage to doing this in a group, where a discussion of and sharing of techniques could occur.

5. Conclusion

It was originally hoped that the BBS would become an interactive peer-to-peer forum where learners could experiment with their language and gain much needed experience in production. However, it was found that using the BBS as a BBS fell short of the mark in terms of volume of output produced by the learners and interactivity itself. The role of the BBS was then changed to be a place where students posted their thoughts on a specified topic and could see what peers had written. If learners were to react to a single text or topic, the question then arose as to what kind of texts and pre-writing activities would produce the desired results, namely lots of output. It was found that short texts with familiar content and a minimum or complete lack of activities aimed at comprehension of the text were most effective at producing the maximum amount of learner output if only for the simple reason that it left more class time for writing. Another benefit of the procedures was the discovery and sharing of effective strategies and resources on the Internet useful when writing in English. Every learner needs to build a set of skills for writing in their foreign language on the net and it is necessary to discover what doesn't work in order to find what does. Sharing ideas in a classroom setting can quicken the trial and error process. A learner who has developed these skills may become more autonomous and carry the learning forward for themselves, far beyond the doors of the classroom.

Works Cited:

- Benson, P. & Voller, P. 1997. *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman
- Holmes, J. L. and Ramos, R. 1991. Talking about learning: establishing a framework for discussing and changing learning processes. In James, C. and Garrett, P. (eds.). *Language Awareness in the Classroom*. 1991: 198-212).
- Swain, M. 1995 Three functions of output in second language learning In G. Cook and B. Seidlhofer (eds): *Principles and Practice in Applied Linguistics: Studies in Honour of H.G. Widdowson*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 125-44
- Walsh, M. (forthcoming) "A SELHI high school 'writing' course: chances for free production and the use of Criterion" *JALT proceedings, National Conference 2005*