A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' USE OF FLICKR PHOTOGRAPHIC NETWORKING TO DEVELOP CONFIDENCE, ENGLISH LANGUAGE FLUENCY AND SHAPE WORLD CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract: One class of 4th year English major students who are part of the Bachelor of Education programme at Udon Thani Rajabhat University volunteered to participate in a project designed to increase their writing fluency whilst exposing them to different people and cultures in Southeast Asia. A secondary objective was to give an enjoyable task based exercise in the use of computers and the internet, with the social responsibilities that this involves. This project was designed to give these students the chance to investigate different cultures and to promote their own in a safe environment by using the Flickr photographic networking programme on the internet; to make contact and exchange ideas and cultures with students from Bali, Hong Kong and Japan. At the time of writing, this is still a work in progress; however, early indications are that students have benefited from this type of social interaction as they are experiencing better understanding of other cultures and beliefs, whilst increasing their computer skills. In addition, this project has widened the horizons of many of the students resulting in what is hoped to be a more pragmatic view of the environment, humanity and equity, beyond sustainability.

Zusammenfassung: Eine Gruppe von Studenten im 4. Studienjahr mit Hauptfach Englisch im BA-Programm Erziehungswissenschaften an der Udon Thani Rajabhat University, nahmen freiwillig an diesem Projekt teil, mit dem Ziel ihre schriftliche Ausdrucksfertigkeit im Englisch zu verbessern, und sie gleichzeitig mit verschiedenen Personen und Kulturen in Südost-Asien in kontakt zu bringen. Eine weitere Zielsetzung des Projekts war die Bereitstellung einer unterhaltsamen Übung zur Tehema Computer- und Internetnutzung und damit zu verbinden soziale Fähigkeiten. Dieses Projekt war darauf ausgerichtet, den Studenten die Möglichkeit zu eröffnen, verschiedene Kulturen kennenzulernen, durch Nutzung des Flick Foto-Netzwerkprogramms ,dem zu erforschen, und ihre eigene Kultur zu fördern und in Interaktion mit Studenten in Bali, Hongkong und Japan Gedanken auszutauschen und deren Kulturen kennenzulernen. Zum Zeitpunkt der Erstellung dieser Abhandlung sind die Studenten noch mit dem Projekt befasst. Es gibt allerdings erste Anzeichen dafür, dass die Studenten durch diese soziale kontakte positive Erfahrungen sammeln, indem sie ein besseres Verständnis für andesen Kulturen und Ansichten entwickeln und dabei gleichzeitig ihre Computerkenntnisse erweitern. Darüber hinaus hat dieses Projekt den Horizont vieler der Studenten erweitert, was hoffentlich dazu führt, dass sie eine pragmatischere Sichtweise ihres Umfeldes, ihrer Mitmenschlichkeit und Gleichstellung mit ausbaufähiger Zukunftsfähigkeit erlangen.

Keywords: writing, computer, English language, Flickr, social networking

Introduction

At the 12th English in Southeast Asia Conference at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi in December 2007, Alec McAulay gave a presentation on teacher generated podcasts, which was of interest due to the ease in which it could be implemented. Having spoken to Alec after his presentation, I was rewarded with an email on a connected matter, which proved to be the start of this project.

Flickr is a photo sharing website that allows people to upload photographs and write comments about them. These details are contained in personal photostreams. It is then possible to write comments on other people's photographs and respond to comments made by others.

Initially, there were four countries involved, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia (Bali) and China (Hong Kong). Others made contact; however, these four are the ones that remain at the time of writing.

A minimum criteria was set so that the four countries involved followed the same procedure; though it was up to the students and teachers involved in the project to determine how far it was to progress.

1. Open a Flickr account.

2. Upload a photograph to Flickr.

3. Write a paragraph describing the photograph (approx. 125 words).

4. Write comments on other people's photographs and respond to comments on their own.

Alec McAulay is the main coordinator of the project with the other teachers Hery in Bali, Jenny in Hong Kong and me as administrators. The teachers managed to practice between themselves before implementing the project for the students as some, like myself, have not used anything like Flickr before and needed to be competent in problem solving before students started their work. No money was to be spent on developing this project, so that it could be free for the students.

Campbell (2007) describes how to set up a Flickr account and shows what administrative functions can be done to manage a project such as this. Details include how to get started, making contacts and joining groups which are vital management processes needed for this project to succeed.

Implementation

Once the teachers were comfortable with using Flickr it was time to involve the students. The majority of Thai students at this university are not confident in using English, so care was taken in choosing the right group for this project. The class in question is in its fourth year and they are English majors studying to become teachers themselves. Having known them for three years, it was felt that they would be ideal as they are extremely well motivated and have many strong characters in the class who would be prepared to experiment and were not afraid of making mistakes. This has been demonstrated by there always being a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in their class (Dörnyei 2001).

This project was given in addition to the normal curriculum coursework as there was no way for it to be assimilated into the existing course. Whilst task loading was a concern, having prior knowledge of the students made it possible to make a valid decision based on their past performances.

The first week of the semester started 9th June 2008 and an overview of what was going to happen concerning the project was given to the class and it was explained that they could earn an increase in their grades for participating. It was important to state that this was to be a voluntary exercise and that those that took part were to be rewarded at the end for their efforts. It was critical to get the agreement of the whole class as it was deemed necessary for everyone to be a participant because they chose to, rather than due to absolutism (Woolcock 2006).

During the overview, it was explained that the project would start the following week when the procedure of opening a Yahoo email account and then a Flickr account would be demonstrated. When setting up the Flickr account, it was important to emphasise that the name chosen must conform to some form of standardisation, so College Asia_Name UDRU was chosen to signify the group membership of College Asia and UDRU to signify Udon Thani Rajabhat University. An example of what could be done was illustrated by displaying an existing teacher's account on a webpage (Graham 2008).

Once the student accounts had been set up, it was then important for everyone to become contacts and friends as this would give the class their own network. That afternoon, one student had already opened an account and emailed me to ask if I would be their contact. This would set the trend for the project as the students were extremely pro-active in their participation, counter to the popular belief that Thai people are shy and reserved. The internet has proved a valuable tool to overcome potential shyness of some students.

The overview explained that the class would practice amongst themselves and that their teacher would also take part in their project. This involved uploading photographs, writing comments on their photographs before writing comments on a classmate's photograph. Once students had shown competence at these activities, it would be time to move on to students from other countries.

By week five, all participants had completed stages one to three, though the target of approximately 125 words seemed beyond some as they preferred to upload more photographs and write briefer comments on all of them. Students were invited to be part of the College Asia group, which gave them access to members from other countries.

Every care was taken to protect the students from undesirable types of people who might use the project as an opportunity to prey on the students. So far there has only been one dubious user and this person had been identified by two teachers independently, so warnings were posted out to the students to block the individual concerned. There is no guarantee that students will not contact dubious users; however, there must be an element of trust between teachers and their students.

At the time of writing, there has been a lot of contact between students from the participating countries despite the different term times which unfortunately limited some of the contacts available.

Findings

Due to the implementation process of having students in Thailand contact each other first, before exploring the other participating countries, it was expected that there would be many more Thai/Thai interactions on students' photostreams. This was the case; however, it gave an interesting insight as to how people think and act, showing a positive sense of humour and the ability to discuss matters that students in the United Kingdom would probably not want to air in public. This seemed of interest to students from other countries who took the opportunity to join the discussion.

One such instance was between two female students. One posted a group photograph asking whether she could be spotted in the photograph containing ten students. She indicated that she was possibly the most beautiful person, only to have a student from Bali disagree with her and indicate someone else. The original student contacted the student deemed "most beautiful" on Flickr and asked her to look at her photostream to read what the male student from Bali had said.

"Cute" and "cuddly" dogs drew the majority of comments from the students, not just from Thailand, but also from students of the other participating countries. The word cute was used excessively in addition to emoticons such as :-). Students were interested in breeds and passed comments indicating that they were not able to have pets of their own or that they wanted to have pets in the future. One student thought a particular dog looked more like a pig, so its owner decided that the dog would have to go on a diet because too many people had passed the same comment.

A student from Bali posted a photograph titled *Menjangan Temple* showing herself wearing a Balinese dress standing on the beach. One of the Thai students, whose nickname in the class is "Handsome Man", took the opportunity to introduce himself indicating that he wanted to be her good friend. This introduction was brought to the attention of the rest of the class during lesson time and was a source of amusement for sometime. Unfortunately, he is still waiting for a reply.

Recently, a musical group called Horseshoe Road visited the university in Udon Thani and the Thai students had the opportunity to listen to their music and meet the two American artists afterwards. This involved the inevitable photo shoot, resulting in some of the pictures being posted on personal photostreams. The photographs drew interest from Japan asking whether these artists were famous in Thailand, resulting in an excellent description of whom they were and why they were performing at Udon Thani Rajabhat University.

Photographs containing a student with a foreigner are at a premium, so after a recent international conference, some students posted photographs of themselves with foreigners. What was interesting was that in some cases there was not any detail about the foreigner in the description. The detail was mostly about where the students were and what they were doing. Details about the foreigner and why

they were there became evident, only after questions were asked by students from other countries wanting to know why the foreigners were there.

Many family members featured on students' photostreams with comments asking relevant questions about family and life, possibly due to a photograph on a teacher's photostream of their family. Social photographs of students at parties and enquiries as to whether individuals were consuming alcohol or soft drinks caused much amusement amongst teachers and students alike. Some students were concerned about how they looked and posted pictures they did not like and others had comical comments sent due to the ethnicity of the clothes they were wearing.

One important and more serious point to note was that one student posted a picture of His Majesty the King of Thailand who is a revered figure in this country. It was always possible that there could be an objection to someone doing this. A Thai student asked why he had chosen to put a picture of the His Majesty the King on Flickr and the response was that he missed his parents and that as His Majesty the King is pictured paying respect to Her Royal Highness, The Princess Mother, it reminded him of how he missed his own mother. This incident highlighted the importance of understanding different cultures when conducting a project such as this.

One Thai student decided to set up his own teachers' group for the class on Flickr to help the class with teaching problems during the coming year when they are to have one year teaching at a school before their graduation. Some students who joined this group were already using it to discuss homework and assignment problems they were experiencing with their existing lessons.

Comments that were put forward from Japan indicated that students were surprised by the amount of self portrait photographs that were posted by Thai students compared to the other participating countries. When comparing Thai photostreams to students from the other participating countries, it was evident that there were far more personal photographs of themselves, confirming what some lifestyle commentators have been stating for sometime, in that there is a pre-occupation with personal appearance in Thailand. Comments written by the Thai students themselves support this assumption.

In addition, Thai students wear uniform to go to university and this was something that Japanese students found interesting as this is not the case in Japan. Moreover, the use of the number 5 which in Thai is pronounced /hâ/ to indicate laughter (555) was again something that was noticeable as outside their culture to the Japanese students.

An area of cross-cultural commonality with Japan is the use of the "V" for victory sign in photographs which is prevalent in many countries in south-east Asia. Normally, the "V" is inclined towards the head and the head tilted to one side.

It was interesting to note that one female Thai student posted military photographs similar to those that her teacher had posted and used the same questioning technique by asking readers to find where she was in the photograph. This student had assumed that if her teacher was using this procedure then it must be correct and did the same herself.

Discussion

Alec McAulay, the teacher from Japan, has another project on Flickr called ynu5photos, which was the subject of his initial presentation at the 12th English in Southeast Asia Conference. It is run from Yokohama National University in Japan and one Thai student, whilst looking for contacts involved in our ESEA College Asia project, found the photo stream and made contact with Alec. This has increased the possibility of being involved in a Japanese project at a later date once the class have viewed the photo stream and information contained in the accompanying blogspot.

Whilst there are educational commentators who are opposed to texting by mobile phone because they believe that it is bad for language and literacy skills, Professor David Crystal in a recent BBC News article believes that in fact this process is there to "enhance and enrich" language skills (NK 2008). He is of the opinion that students of English know when to use this type of English and when to use a more formal type. For future projects, it may be prudent to set initial standards of writing if the texting type of English is to be omitted.

 This project, whilst focussing on fluency, does lend itself to accurate language usage in that there is the possibility of students collaborating in correcting each others' spelling mistakes and grammar once the project has run its course. Nunan (2004), whilst describing Brumfit (1984), points out that fluency and accuracy are complementary and not opposites as some would have us believe. This way, the fluency of the students is not interrupted and the English language learning objectives can be completed in a collaborative and non threatening way. An example in question is that of a student who was "snookering" with her family, when it is obvious from the photograph that she was in fact "snorkelling" with her family.

Udon Thai can be very insular if there is not the will to go "outside the box." This project is proving very successful on many levels. It has proved that the English major students at this university can use English to describe their country, their town and themselves. They have already proved that they have the character to be able to contact other students from different countries and offer opinions on what they have seen and what people have said, showing a politeness and humour which causes no offence and fosters good relationships between students from different countries. All of this has been completed using the medium of English.

It has taken this pilot course to reveal what can be done and to identify the fine tuning that will be implemented the next time the project is undertaken. This was a free writing exercise with very few guidelines given as there was an initial fear that too many rules and regulations would stifle the fluency of the students. This project can best be defined as a social constructivist model where the teacher, learner, task and context are interrelated, none of them acting in isolation (Williams and Burden 1997).

At the time of writing, this project still has eight weeks to run and there will be a chance for feedback from the students as well as from teachers as to the improvements that can be made before the next class undertakes the project. Piaget (1971) informs us that language is a group institution and imposes its rules on us. Whilst this is true, how the students have used the language demonstrates what can be done when the primary focus is on the message rather than the linguistic code used (Ellis 1997). It is because of this, that written feedback of some kind is so important for a project such as this, in that it should reflect assessment as well as having the purpose to help and to teach (Harmer 2007).

Opportunities have arisen for the teachers involved to write research papers and case studies such as this to evaluate the project with a view to improving the concept and procedures concerned, enabling future teachers to enhance selected areas when implementing in the future. The interaction that the students have had with their classmates and with students from foreign countries has opened their eyes to what is going on around them, taking them away from the educational lockstep mentality that exists in Thailand. This project has allowed students to work at their own pace, whilst making their own choices, in addition to promoting their own identity and in some cases, devotion (Goodman 1971).

In conclusion, there is a further eight weeks of this project until completion; however, there is already a considerable amount of positive feedback from students and teachers. Teachers from outside the project have stated that there are many different areas of English language and personal development for the students, giving the opportunity for teachers to continue research as to the implications that this type of project would have as part of the main curriculum, rather than as a voluntary exercise run in parallel. Once the project has run its course and feedback from the students has been analysed, there are plenty of options open for forward thinking teachers and curriculum designers to take the initiative.

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