Using Discusion Forums for ESL Communication Skills

Aileen Ng
Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)
asccng(at)ntu.edu.sg

The discussion forum is mainly used to generate asynchronous online discussions amongst students. In this paper, I would like to suggest using the discussion forum for another purpose; that is to implement online tutorials in a communication skills class. Here, I will discuss the strengths and drawbacks of implementing the online tutorials as well as provide some recommendations for improvement.

Background Information

In the university where I teach, we offer a course known as "Professional Communication" to final-year Engineering undergraduates. This course aims to equip students with the essential writing and speaking skills required to function effectively in their future workplaces. The topics introduced in this course include business writing, conflict management, job search skills, intercultural communication and business meetings. Within a semester, students enrolled in this course are required to attend a one-hour lecture weekly and a two-hour tutorial fortnightly.

Since this course endeavours to develop and improve students' communication skills both in writing and speaking, there is definitely a need to equalize both the writing and speaking activities executed in class. Nevertheless, I have always found this to be a monumental task for two main reasons. First, 12 hours of tutorials (with 4 hours devoted to students' oral presentation as part of their course assessment) make student contact hours limited. Consequently, teachers always feel rushed in class as they attempt to cover all the necessary topics. In most cases, there is only sufficient time for students to carry out discussions and do short presentations. Usually, there is little or no time left for students to work on writing tasks. In other words, there is really no tangible reinforcement of what students' have learnt to develop their writing skills. Furthermore, there are usually more than 25 students in each class for this course to cater to the large number of engineering students in the university given the number of teachers we have in the English Language Centre. With this in mind, most teachers avoid administering individual tasks to students. It takes too much time and effort to provide feedback to students on top of the marking load especially when teachers take more than five tutorial groups. To tackle these issues, I decided to implement a series of online tutorials using the discussion forum to facilitate writing tasks that will help students to hone their writing skills for professional communication.

Reasons for Using the Discussion Forum to Implement Online Tutorials

The discussion forum was selected as the platform to implement the online tutorials for several reasons. First, this is an easily accessible tool for the students. It is one of the common tools available on the university's online learning management system. Students are also familiar with the discussion forum because they have been introduced to it since their freshmen year. Moreover, in their engineering courses, students are sometimes also required to use the discussion forum for specific purposes. Since students are familiar with the tool, a lot of time can be saved on training them to use the tool. Other than being easily accessible and a familiar tool, the discussion forum is also not a complicated tool; basically students can only create or modify their postings in the forum. This makes it suitable for the general nature of the tasks that were administered as online tutorials for this course. The online tasks that I have developed were mainly writing activities where students were required to post their finished products on the discussion forum and if need be, make necessary modifications. Finally, I chose this tool because it provides an avenue for students to share their writing products with each other and at the same time give their feedback regarding other students' work. Given the nature of the discussion forum as an asynchronous communication tool, students were not restricted by time to give their feedback instantly. They can afford more time to read and comment on their classmates' work. This also allows for a less-threatening environment which I had hoped would enable students to explore and

learn together (Beauvois, 1992) with less restrictions compared to face-to-face tutorials where some students may have reservations about saying aloud their opinions for fear of being questioned, ridiculed or rebutted.

Implementing the Online Tutorials

To understand how the online tutorials were implemented, let me first explain what I mean by "online tutorials" in this context. For this course, the online tutorials primarily concern exercises or tasks that I posted on the discussion forum. In each online tutorial, there are four standard types of information namely the task's objective, instructions about the task, method of submitting the task and the deadline for posting the task online. Table 1 below shows an example of an online tutorial used in the course:

Table 1: Example of an Online Tutorial

Online Tutorial 1: Writing Business Messages

Objective: In this tutorial, you will write an e-mail memo by adopting the PAIBOC approach.

Instructions:
Based on the situation below, write an e-mail memo to your staff. Your e-mail should not exceed **250 words**.

You are the Human Resource Manager of ABC Corporations. Recently, an employee was suspended from work without pay for 3 days for violating the company's web policy. He was caught surfing pornographic websites during office hours. You would like to remind employees about the company's web policy regarding surfing prohibited sites and reading and sending personal messages on company's computer during office hours. The policy also states the penalties for violation which include work suspension up to and including termination of employment.

Please post your message on this forum as a **Word attachment** by **21st January 2008**.

The students were required to work in groups of four or five people for the online tutorials. These groups were formed in their first face-to-face tutorial after an ice-breaking activity. I informed them that they were to remain in the same groups while working on all the stipulated online tutorials.

As students only attended face-to-face tutorials once a fortnight, the online tutorials were posted right after each of the face-to-face tutorials to allow students ample time to work on the tasks before their next face-to-face tutorial two weeks later. In effect, students had about two weeks to complete the online tutorials.

As a whole, four online tutorials were implemented. Table 2 below states the topics of the online tutorials:

Table 2: Topics of the Online Tutorials

Online Tutorial 1: E-mail memo to serve as a reminder about company's web policy

Online Tutorial 2: Main section of a job application letter to highlight job applicant's key competencies

Online Tutorial 3: Oral presentation proposal to prepare for a formal class presentation

Online Tutorial 4: E-mail complaint letter to resolve conflict

Generally each online tutorial was related to the focus of the preceding week's face-to-face tutorial. In this way, I had hoped that the online tutorials would be able to help consolidate the key concepts discussed during the lectures and applied in the face-to-face tutorials.

Reflection: Benefits and Drawbacks of Implementing the Online Tutorials

Benefits

I implemented the online tutorials as a trial-run in one of my classes in the last academic semester. Several benefits were identified with regard to students' quality of learning. At the beginning of this paper, I had mentioned that one of the problems surrounding this course is the lack of opportunities (due to time constraints) provided for students to hone their writing skills in relation to professional communication. The implementation of the online tutorials appears to be able to tackle this issue providing reinforcement tasks to enable students to practice their writing. Besides acting as reinforcement tasks to help students develop and improve their writing skills, the online tutorials also facilitated collaborative learning. The online tutorials were to be done as group work outside of class time. By doing so, students could share their ideas and opinions in order to produce better quality writing as compared to if the tasks were to be completed independently. In other words, students' interaction through collaborative learning enabled them to extend their learning capabilities beyond what can be achieved through individual learning (Warschauer, 2005).

Furthermore, an implied benefit of collaborating on the online tutorials was that students would be able to consciously or unconsciously apply the skills of professional communication (egs: conflict resolution strategies, fundamentals of teamwork, etc) to work cohesively and dynamically. The fact that the online tutorials were to be done outside of class also meant that students were not restricted by class conditions such as time constraints and lack of resources. With the online tutorials students were given more time to complete the tasks and they had the freedom to consult other resources such as library materials and the Internet to complete the prescribed tasks. This in turn led to students producing good quality writing products. For instance, as I was assessing the students' finished products based on the online tutorials, I noticed that some of the groups paid attention not only to the content of the writing but also the layout of their finished products such as page alignment, line spacing, bold and italics for emphasis, etc. Other than the content, such apparently "trivial" aspects of writing can also play a part in achieving effective professional communication.

Drawbacks

Whenever teachers decide to innovate pedagogy to enhance learning, other than identifying the strengths of the innovation, teachers should also be realistic about its possible drawbacks. By doing so, developmental work can be carried out to realise improvements to increase students' positive learning experience.

Three problems were identified during the implementation of the online tutorials. Some of my students commented that they found it difficult to meet to work on the tasks as most of them did not share common free periods from classes. To counter this problem, a few of the more technologically-savvy students resorted to using other means to communicate with each other so that ultimately the online tasks could still be completed collaboratively and on time. These students revealed that technology was largely used to tackle the meeting problem. Some groups communicated through e-mail and the short-message-system (SMS) while there were also others who chatted online using the Yahoo Messenger or other forms of online chat facility to work on the tasks together. Besides finding a common time to carry out face-to-face meetings, another problem noted was students' lack of active participation relating to giving feedback about other students' work. In this case, students were more like passive contributors of the discussion forum. In other words, there was no difficulty getting them to work on the writing tasks together but when it came to receiving their feedback, they were less forthcoming. Lastly, not all groups were cohesive and dynamic. I had some students revealing to me at the end of the course that the group work was at times not only mentally challenging but emotionally draining as well because they had to deal with a few difficult group members who displayed negative attitudes such as not contributing to the group discussions, failing to do their share of the work and not showing up during group meetings. As a result, besides ending up producing poor quality work, these students felt demoralized and some internal conflicts either escalated or were never resolved.

Suggestions for Improvement

I believe the online tutorials have, to a certain extent provided more opportunities for students to improve their writing skills for professional purposes. Nevertheless, in view of some of the drawbacks that were observed, there is still room for improvement. To encourage and enhance interaction amongst students within the online tutorials to facilitate the sharing of ideas and opinions, the feedback portion for each of the tutorials could be more structured. As it is, I did not provide any concrete instructions as to how students should give their feedback to one another. Perhaps that could be the main reason why students hardly gave any feedback to their peers. Other than giving instructions about the main tasks, instructions on how feedback can be given could be provided in terms of listing down a few guiding questions for students to answer as a means of constructing their feedback. As for tackling students' negative attitudes, perhaps setting aside some time for students to write short reflections on their learning experience in the online tutorials would help to ascertain reasons behind some students' poor learning attitude so actions can be taken to arrest the problems.

Conclusion

For teachers who are constantly grappling to find the right balance between giving their input and receiving students' output to improve the quality of their students' learning, online tutorials may provide a way for teachers to achieve this balance.

References

- Beauvois, M.H. (1992). Computer Assisted Classroom Discussion in the Foreign Language Classroom: Conversations in Slow Motion. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25 (5), 455 – 465.
- Warschauer, M. (2005). Sociocultural Perspectives on CALL in J.L. Egbert and G.M. Petrie (Eds.), (pp. 41–51). CALL *Research Perspectives*. NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.