like a good idea at first, but actually 100 degrees is not a comfortable temperature and neither is 0. One end of the scale needs to be comfortable and one end uncomfortable for the data to render positive and negative feelings. Perhaps +25 degrees -25 degrees might work better, but this still feels not quite right. Maybe colours alone might be a better option?

The purpose of writing this article is, in short, to appeal for collaborators in developing this scale. Clearly it will need a good deal of work to refine, but the goal of better and more accurate perception data is surely a noble one.

Anyone who would like to work with the author on this should contact him directly at the following email address:

lockleyta@gmail.com

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Using blog post challenges

Tamatha Roman

Abstract

This article examines the use of blog post challenges in an English language classroom. Based on the course, Japan’s Environmental Impact, students were asked to complete environmental challenges outside of the classroom: activities to be completed on their own time as a way to bridge lessons with real-world experiences. Additionally, students were required to reflect on their experience by posting on a class blog on Tumblr. This extended classroom learning provided students with a chance to use content-focused English outside the classroom and develop autonomous learning skills, as well as allowed the teacher to informally assess the effectiveness of her lessons. Through the challenges, it was found that students were able to apply what they learned in class to the challenges, increasing their self-motivation and willingness to evaluate their environmental footprint.
Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language, especially in a monolingual country like Japan, can be a challenge in that students rarely get the opportunity to speak English outside of the classroom. Without the necessity of using the language on a daily basis, it is easy to see the walls of the classroom as the only place to practice speaking. However, the classroom alone cannot completely emulate the outside world, and often lacks the kind of spontaneity that occurs when people interact in their natural settings. Therefore, a key responsibility of teachers is to enrich students’ learning process by connecting the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom to situations that arise outside of the classroom.

Some ways to do this include bringing in guest speakers, using authentic materials (such as movies or music) or organizing field trips. Another way involves promoting extended classroom learning—a form of homework or task that students complete on their own time outside of the classroom—which has relevance to the real world. This type of learning can be beneficial for both teachers and students. It allows teachers to assess the impact and student comprehension of their lessons. For students, extended classroom learning can solidify their learning, as they can make real-life connections. Furthermore, extended classroom learning encourages students to have personal control over their experiences and complete tasks on their own accord, leading to an increase in motivation and self-reflection.

Blog Challenges

This article will focus on one form of extended classroom learning used in my third-year, university-level course in the International Communication department at Kanda University of International Studies. Students in this course had advanced English skills, having already taken prerequisite courses in Reading, Writing, International Communication, and Media English. The course was entitled Japan’s Environmental Impact, a content elective focused on developing students’ knowledge on environmental issues that affect the university, Japan, and the world as a whole. The class centered on three action projects; as a supplement to the course and a form of extended classroom learning, I decided to assign something I called blog post challenges, which corresponded with the environmental content of the course.

The concept of challenges (specifically environmental challenges) was taken from the Otesha Book’s Teacher Menu (2006), an environmental workbook designed to engage and empower students to take action toward a sustainable future. Each topic of the workbook—such as water, media, and coffee—offers up a challenge for students to do in or outside of the classroom. For example, one challenge asks students to “wear an outfit that is logo and leather-free.” Inspired by this workbook, I decided to incorporate similar environmental challenges for my own course.

Students were assigned a bi-weekly environment challenge based on the class material. The class topics were disposable waste, oceanic resources, clothing, and cosmetics. Therefore, some challenges I used included the following:

1) Do not use plastic bottles, plastic bags, or disposable chopsticks for one week.

2) Do not eat any living products from the ocean for one week.

3) Carry the garbage you accumulate for 24 hours.

4) Wear no makeup to class on Tuesday.

Students completed the challenge on their own time, by a certain due date. If they felt uncomfortable with the challenge, or could not fully succeed in doing it, they were asked to reflect on why it was...
unsuccessful. The challenges offered a good opportunity for my students to pay attention to their own environmental impact and to reinforce the English that was taught in the classroom. That is, students would reuse learned vocabulary, build new genre-specific vocabulary through completing the challenges, engage in English conversations about the challenges, and use critical-thinking skills to write English reflections on the challenges.

After completing the challenge, students were then required to blog about their experience on our class Tumblr page. This specific blogging site was chosen as it is free and offers a simple interface that is easy to teach to English students of all levels. In addition, students are not required to sign-up for an account with Tumblr. In my case, students simply added their blog entry by replying to the actual challenge post itself, created by me. If technology is not readily accessible, teachers may choose to have their students complete reflections in a written journal.

Students were asked to reflect upon the challenge, whether it was a success or a failure, based on a number of questions that I provided. Some questions included: Was the challenge difficult or easy? What did you learn from completing this challenge? What do you think this challenge says about Japan's environmental impact? Based on what you learned from this challenge, what can we do about its related environmental issues? As I did, the teacher may also provide a word limit, or a requirement to read other students’ blog entries.

Assessment is another option with the reflections. Teachers may choose to develop a rubric for the written responses, evaluating grammar, content, or use of new classroom vocabulary. In my case, I felt uncomfortable formally grading blog entries for two reasons: First, the challenge blogs were meant to be a supplement to the class material, which was already graded on other factors. Therefore, I saw the challenges as a way to encourage autonomous learning without the pressure of assessment. Second, although I did not formally offer a rubric or assess the entries, certain benchmarks were expected. Students were required to write a certain number of words per blog entry. In addition, I took note of common mistakes I saw throughout each week and used them as mini grammar-lessons in the actual classroom. I also individually commented on each blog entry, noting grammatical, organizational, or content-related errors.

Results

One school year after its launch and 44 students later, the environmental blog challenges were a great success. The successes were twofold. First, students made connections from the classroom to these outside challenges. As they reflected on whether their challenges were successful or not, students used class material (i.e. vocabulary, documentary clips, jigsaw readings) and critical thinking skills to support and contrast the ideas in their entries. Furthermore, English discussions were sparked in and outside of the classroom as to what was learned through completing the challenges. Second, students wrote with passion. Even students who were quite introverted in class found a voice within the class blog. It is sometimes difficult as a teacher to grasp whether or not the class material is critically understood by your students. However, in allowing time for reflection, I have come to realize that students are more perceptive than they may seem in class.

Of course, challenges can be created for other contexts. Teachers can connect most contexts, topics, and student levels to

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4 *Tumblr* is a microblogging platform and social networking site with over 81 million blogs worldwide (Tumblr, 2012).
extended learning activities. But whatever the context, the concept of extended classroom can have positive outcomes. With so little time spent in the classroom, many students want and need the extra time to use their second language in a productive manner. Although they may seem like homework, challenges can be a fun, almost competitive way to enrich the classroom experience and create long-term connections between what students learn in the classroom and other parts of their lives.

References


Teachers’ aversion to video games in language learning despite neuroscientific support

Tom Gorham & Jon Gorham

Before he was elected to multiple terms as a widely popular mayor of London, British MP Boris Johnson (2006), proclaimed that video games were rotting the brains of young people, stunting the development of their literacy skills, and causing them to “become like blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing they are still conscious. [The video games] teach them nothing. They stimulate no ratiocination, discovery or feat of memory” (para. 5). The only evidence that he offered to support this conclusion was one recent experience where he observed a lone 11-year-old playing a game about Vikings. His advice to parents was to smash their children’s video game consoles with a sledgehammer and “strike a blow for literacy” (para. 13).

Near the end of 2012, New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) announced that it had acquired over a dozen video games that would form the base of a new and growing collection of digital games that would be installed in its Philip Johnson Galleries in early 2013. In explaining why MoMA had made this decision, Antonelli (2012) described the selected games as: outstanding examples of interactional design [wherein] the scenarios, rules, stimuli, incentives, and narratives envisioned by the designers come alive in the behaviors they encourage and elicit