

The Pros and Cons of Using *Ning* in the Language Classroom

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I. Introduction

In recent years, blogs and online social networks (OSNs) have become prevalent in all areas of society, and English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms are no exception. By using online social networking sites and the blog capabilities they entail, EFL or English as a second language (ESL) classrooms can be extended beyond the confines of school walls and schedules, allowing students more opportunities to put English to use in meaningful, motivating, and modern ways. Previously, email or even pen and paper exchanges were used for the similar purposes, but each had their own pitfalls (Rooks, 2008). The advent of Web 2.0 has made sharing knowledge and linguistic interactions possible for EFL students all over the world (de Almeida Soares, 2008; Petersen, Divitini, & Chabert, 2008), and free online social networking sites have ushered EFL and ESL into the age of easily accessible, instantaneous inter-class, intra-class, and international student interaction in English. According to Wu (2005, p. 71) these networking sites are where learners from different countries can “have joint access and publishing rights” to blogs and other forms of communication technology. Teachers and students alike can utilize OSN sites to create networks for communicating in a variety of ways, including blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, and voice threads. This paper will give a brief overview of the rationale behind the use of blogs and online social networks in EFL and ESL classrooms, demonstrate how to set up a simple network on *Ning*, a freely available OSN used in freshman and sophomore EFL writing classes by students in Kwansei Gakuin University’s (KGU) School of Science and Technology (SST) during the Spring Semester of 2009. Finally, the authors will give a summary of the pros and cons of *Ning* as it was used in the context for EFL exchange.

Utilizing OSNs are not only a good chance to use technology in the EFL classroom,

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but also they can become helpful tools for educators to meet clear course objectives and accomplish class-oriented tasks such as increasing student writing fluency (Fellner and Apple, 2005) and computer literacy (Godwin-Jones, 2003), connecting English language learners (ELLs) with their peers in other places (Pinkman and Bordolin, 2006; Ray, 2008), developing intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Elola and Oskoz, 2008), and creating instructional resources, collaborative tools, and showcases for student projects (Selingo, 2004; Ray, 2008). Harper (2005, p. 32) posits that blogs can even generate “reciprocal self-disclosure between the instructor and student, and more introverted students who typically do not reveal in the classroom may expose a great deal online.” The benefits of OSNs in the language classroom are clearly wide-reaching and useful on multiple levels.

Instructors of English as a foreign language (henceforth, instructors) often struggle to overcome several common hurdles for meeting program objectives. Instructors face difficulties in finding audiences for their students’ writing outside of the classroom (Campbell, 2004). Also, many students do not seem to see English as a useful tool for communicating with people all around the world, but rather simply as a requirement that they must fulfill during their time at university. At Kwansei Gakuin University, SST instructors sought to utilize blogs as a way to enlarge their students’ reading audiences and thus make their writing more meaningful and rewarding. Another hurdle of the SST English program was that class time was limited to 90 minutes per week of writing instruction. By assigning interaction on OSNs as homework, the time that students spent writing English each week was extended.

One main objective that instructors wanted to cover via online social networking was exposing students to web 2.0 technology and the responsibilities that come with it. Since the Internet has become mainstream, using it appropriately is more important than ever. Armstrong and Retterer (2008, p.235) argue that using blogs are a good chance to show students how they are “[mechanisms] for sharing information about the instructional uses of technology.” For example, the SST instructors guided students in their use of the online social networking site *Ning* and pointed out that everything students wrote could potentially be seen by anyone else in the world. Therefore, students learned to be cautious about sharing private information such as personal names, anecdotes, or pictures, while simultaneously learning how to purposefully interact with OSN English interfaces.

Perhaps the most important objective met through online social networking was that students were able to increase their writing fluency. Research has shown that frequent ungraded writing leads to higher levels of linguistic confidence in students (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008). Oftentimes, writing in the language classroom only focuses on the accuracy of grammar and structure. While accuracy was certainly important in a portion of the KGU SST English curriculum, fluency in writing was also a main focus.

Therefore, when students wrote blogs, they were only graded on how much they wrote, not on how accurate their grammar or spelling was. This focus on fluency urged students to express their ideas freely without worrying about whether the structure was perfect, helped them develop typing skills in English, and allowed them to try new words and expressions in a comfortable environment where their affective filters as language learners were perhaps lower than they were for normal graded writing assignments.

Online social networking offered the opportunity to the students of KGU SST to meet these English curriculum objectives. After trying several other Web 2.0 technologies, our department settled on *Ning*. However, as with almost all technology used in educational settings, there are both pros and cons to using *Ning* in the language classroom.

II. Pros of *Ning*

The most obvious benefit of *Ning* to the educator is that it is free. Even with budget restrictions, teachers can still use *Ning* to extend the language classroom, provided they and their students have computers and access to the Internet. Once on the *Ning* site, it is very simple to create your own network where people can join and interact through one personalized web address. One important option given when creating a new network has to do with user privacy, and *Ning* offers many useful privacy settings for various situations. Currently, if the creator chooses to create a private network, this cannot be changed later. If the creator chooses to create a public network, however, these settings can later be changed to increase the privacy levels so that people who are not members of the network cannot view the network's content. For the program at SST, the network was made public so that sign up would be easier for students. After all students had joined the network, the privacy settings were then changed to make the site more secure so that only approved members could navigate beyond the main page.

After a network is created, other teachers and students can sign up. An email address, a birthday, a name and a user password are required. This step provides ample opportunity for teachers to instruct students about Internet privacy. For example, teachers can guide students in choosing a user name that is suitable. To avoid potential problems with students' full names being visible on the Internet, SST students were encouraged to use only their first name and student numbers as their "full name" on *Ning*. Also, since the group network was public, students were given a choice to upload any avatar image for their *Ning* account, not necessarily a personal photo. This further ensured privacy for the students.

Another advantage of using *Ning* is that it offers teachers the chance to gather bio-data from students such as their hometowns, their email addresses, their majors in

school, or any other information the instructor may want through fully customizable profile questions. There is no limit to what can be asked or required, and the answers can be made public or private, depending on the settings the administrator chooses. Public settings leave the answers to these questions visible to any network member on an individual's "My Page," but private answers are only revealed to administrators. Profile questions can be modified at any time. In the SST, very basic public profile questions like student majors, hometowns, and a few private profile questions like class number and email address were chosen to help teachers keep their network members organized. This streamlined approach to profile questions helped to keep sign up time and any potential confusion to a minimum for students at the beginning of the OSN project.

Once profile questions are completed, membership is granted to the network. Members can then join any administrator-created group within that network. Administrators of the *Ning* network can create or delete groups at any time, allowing teachers to create new groups for different classes and stay organized for grading purposes. There is no need to create an entire new network for each class, unless complete privacy is needed. With the click of a button, the teacher can access a list of all students in each group (class), and then can click on each student's avatar or user name to check work. By having each class as a different group, the administrator can also send a message to the entire group by clicking just one button, similar to having a "list" on an email account. Also, each group can have different settings, so it is possible for the administrator to allow some groups (perhaps upper-classmen) more freedom on the network, but keep features simple for others (first year students).

The ability to divide students on the network into separate groups helps to keep teachers and students organized, and also maintains the option for inter-group interaction, making it one of the biggest advantages of *Ning*. Each group is listed on the main page of the network, so groups can find and interact with one another easily. All students on the same network can interact with one another, regardless of their group. Using this setup, the audience of any one SST student in the authors' network was approximately 10 times larger as what it would have been if they had created separate networks for each class. Eventually, the authors collaborated with a teacher at Shimane University in Japan and Yonsei University in South Korea to further increase the *Ning* network audience and give students even more motivation to use English for a purpose. If the network administrators decide to make the network entirely public, then the potential audience would increase exponentially.

Ning also allows administrators the flexibility to add or subtract network features such as blogs, discussion forums, chats, music, photos, or videos at any time. Teachers can therefore make their network simple to start, and then later add more advanced features as students get comfortable with the interface. For the SST OSN project, blogs

were the main focus, and to keep distractions to a minimum, no other features, such as instant chats or music libraries, were added to the network that students could manipulate. When students were signed in to the network, teachers could be sure that they were either writing, reading or commenting on a blog post because there was no other option. There are almost limitless possibilities for OSN enhancement, however, as *Ning* gives administrators complete freedom to embed third party widgets from various sites and even interactive audio and video components from third parties.

Network flexibility and chances for customization are some of *Ning*'s strongest points. *Ning* also allows for multiple administrators on any network. This lets teachers work together as a team on one network to create the ideal parameters for their students collectively, but still gives each teacher options to customize their own groups within the network. For example, the two authors shared one network, but each had five individual groups within that network. Both administrators could make changes to the network at any time.

III. Cons of *Ning*

On the other hand, *Ning* is not without fault. Aside from the inherent limitation of asynchronous discourse that blogs suffer from due to their "post-comment structure" (Carney, 2007, p.118), *Ning* falls victim to some interface shortcomings that sometimes make for a frustrating user experience. One annoyance of *Ning*'s interface is that there is no easy way to search for old blog posts. Some other blogging platforms archive old blogs by month, but *Ning* simply lists blogs in the order in which they were posted with the most recent at the top. To find older postings, the searcher must continually click the "previous" button and scroll through perhaps hundreds of postings to find the desired blog entry.

Another blog-viewing frustration that *Ning* users face is that only a preview of each blog post is shown initially. If the user wants to view an entire blog entry from the main or group page, then he or she must navigate by clicking the "continue" button to a new page where the whole blog entry is shown. While this is a minor inconvenience to the general reader, for the teacher who is reading dozens or perhaps hundreds of blogs, it makes grading a tedious task of extra clicks. For grading purposes, some KGU SST instructors remedy this by having students copy and paste their entire blog postings into a MS Word document for collection via email attachment or paper copy.

Advertisements are another downside to *Ning*. All along the right side bar, there are immovable ads. This means that an administrator's network creation is limited to the left side bar and the middle section of the screen.

Concerning the type interface of *Ning*'s blogs, there are no color font options beyond the set themes, so highlighting key phrases in a different color within a blog

post or text box is impossible. Also, there are no emoticons with which to comment. These limit the overall interface of the platform.

Saving in-progress work on *Ning* can also cause some student confusion. One such instance is the “Save as draft” option when writing a blog post. This will save a student’s blog post as a draft, where it will not be visible to the public until the student finishes it. Upon signing out of *Ning*, however, the work-in-progress gets buried within several layers of user menus, which have proven difficult for both students and teachers to find and access. Many times, students assume that the work was not saved and start over again. If students opt for the “publish post” way of saving a new blog post, then the incomplete post is viewable to everyone on the network, but is much easier for students to find and edit later.

Another instance of confusion arises when students are linked to multiple networks through one *Ning* user ID. In this case, each time a student navigates to a new network, he or she must sign in again, even if he or she is already signed in to the original network. Some students (and the authors) do not understand why this is necessary, especially because any work done on one network is not transferred onto another network automatically. To illustrate, if a student is logged in on his class network (Network A) and posts a blog entry, then wants to navigate to another school’s network (Network B) to comment on some blogs there, he must sign in to Network B, but he will not be able to see his new blog entry on Network B. The only way for his work to be posted on Network B is if he copies it from Network A and pastes it in Network B. Despite the lack of synchronization between the two networks, the *Ning* user ID, and password are identical for both. This separate network - one ID system may be ideal for someone who wants to keep work and social networks separate, but for interaction between students from various classes, schools or countries, this interface is inconvenient. To remedy the situation, all members who want to interact with each other should join one network, but have separate groups within that network.

A few important issues about *Ning* that teachers need to be aware of are that fake or mistaken email addresses are accepted at sign up. If students accidentally make a typing mistake when signing up, then that mistaken email is what they will have to use to sign in at a later time. Fortunately, the email can be corrected later if the administrator looks it up, but initially, a mistaken email address can be very troublesome for the student and the teacher. Another fact to keep in mind when setting up a *Ning* network is that slowdowns may occur depending on how many students are trying to access the site at once. The authors experienced numerous network slow-downs, anywhere from a few minutes of wait time to completely frozen web browsers that required re-launching. This was particularly frustrating when trying to guide a classroom of 30 or more students through the sign up process. Whether this slowdown was *Ning*-specific or a school-related network problem is unclear.

Table I. The pros and cons of the online social network *Ning*

Advantages	Disadvantages
100% free	asynchronous linguistic exchange inherent to blogs
various privacy settings	inefficient interface for searching for past blog entries
easy sign up	interface can be time-consuming when viewing large number of student blogs
profile questions make gathering student bio-data easy	advertisements
large numbers of students easily organized into groups	limited font and color options
mass-messaging to particular groups and/or networks	counterintuitive save/draft/edit interface for blogs
adjustable user access to network and group features	constant sign-ins when switching between networks
highly customizable features	lack of email confirmation for sign ups leads to mistaken login information
numerous network administrators allow chances for teacher collaboration	occasional network slowdowns, especially with many users at once

IV. Future recommendations & Conclusions

Student-student interaction is the primary intrinsic motivator of using OSNs in the EFL classroom. When using *Ning*, SST students realized that other students could read their work and comment on it, so the effort students usually put in to assignments was noticeably higher than for other “normal” writing assignments. Increased motivation was not the only area of noticeable impact with this OSN project. In the KGU SST program, in an effort to build fluency, students were graded only on how much they wrote, where 120 words per blog was equal to the minimum passing score. In most classes, if students wrote 200 words, they received 100% for that posting. Out of four different first-year classes, only 19% of students chose to write less than 180 words. That means that only 22 students out of 116 received lower than a score of 90% on their blogs during the first term of university. The vast majority of students chose to put effort into their writing volume and frequency when posting blogs and comments, thus resulting in purposeful English interaction in an EFL setting.

Despite a few shortcomings, *Ning* was a useful technology that helped the KGU SST English department implement and achieve important course objectives. Further

investigation into different blog hosting sites is needed, however, as this technology is constantly in flux. The constant updating and release of new technology should allow for pioneering methods to fulfill course objectives in new and motivating ways.

In short, *Ning* is an OSN that is easy to learn, but difficult to master. The authors are developing a *Ning* site to help English language learners and their teachers interact in English. Hopefully, students and teachers all over the world can exchange ideas and opinions, as well as pictures and videos, on this single *Ning* network. If you are a teacher interested in using the authors' English *Ning* Global Language Interactive Social Hub (ENGLISH) in your classroom, please visit <http://www.english-hub.ning.com>, sign up, and join the 'Ninguists' group for more information.

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