Blended Learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom

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This fourth update focuses firstly on the use of **wikis** by teachers in a language school or institution with a number of centres, and then on **mind mapping** software.

Setting up a wiki for a teaching institution or company

Chapter 9 of Blended Learning talks about setting up a wiki for learners to use as part of a course project or as a collaborative writing tool. Another use for a wiki, which is not discussed in the book, is as a collaborative tool for teachers working for an institution or for a training company with dispersed locations. The following are some things to consider when setting up such a wiki.

Choosing a provider

There are a number of companies that offer easy to use online services which allow you to set up a wiki in seconds. They often offer a basic package for free and a fully featured package for an annual price. There are a few questions to ask yourself when deciding which provider to use and whether or not you need to pay:

- How big is your wiki going to be? This has an impact on the number of pages and size of the online storage. If you plan to use the wiki to store and share documents, presentations, audio files etc., you will need the maximum space available.
- How many users do you plan to have? The basic package may only offer a limited number of individual users.
- Do you want your wiki to be password protected so that only users from your institution or company can gain access? Most free wiki services leave your wiki and its contents open to be viewed by anyone on the Web.

Deciding who is going to use it and how

You should decide who will have access to the wiki, especially if a username and password is required to access it. You can set the privileges of users. For example, a DoS or department head may have full rights to modify any part of the wiki. On the other hand, an ordinary user, such as a teacher, may be able to create and edit pages but is barred from using the controls that lock pages and invite new users and which can be used to modify global aspects of the wiki such as the visual design.

Deciding what it is for

There are a number of straightforward uses for a wiki:
- A central storage area. Teaching resources can be accessed and added to by teachers.
- A forum for projects. Documents can be stored, discussed and up-dated in a single, virtual location.
- A communication channel. Information can be propagated to a large audience.

All of these can be extremely useful in an institution with a large, changing teaching staff or for a company which has teaching centres in many locations across several countries.

Structuring and organising it

The best advice for deciding how to structure a wiki is the same as for any website: spend time planning it out on paper before you start to create pages. This will allow you to determine what you need to include; to identify what you might have forgotten; and, most importantly, how it is all going to fit together. If you design a good structure, it will be transparent to the people using the wiki. If your wiki has a confusing or difficult to navigate structure, your users will struggle with it every time they log on. Creating an easy-to-use structure can be the difference between whether the wiki becomes a daily part of people's working life or whether it gets ignored and forgotten. Here are some ideas for organisational categories for a wiki for storing and sharing teaching materials:

- Warmers and fillers.
- No materials lessons.
- Materials with lesson plans. Organised by grammar point, functional topic, etc.
- Worksheets without lesson plans.
- Materials in development.
- Advice on using technology in the classroom.
- Teacher training materials.

Guiding people to use wikis effectively and consistently

The raison d'être of a wiki is the facility it offers users to add and modify its content. The main challenge is often to guide users towards using a consistent format for new information and to lay down rules on what can and can not be added as well as modifying pages and work added by others.

On a project wiki, a set of documents are frequently being worked on by several people at once. Although the wiki will keep track of who has made what changes or additions and when, it can not mediate between project team members who disagree with each other's changes. On a materials wiki, teachers may not appreciate their colleagues changing their lesson plans or "correcting" their exercises without permission or consultation. Any set of rules for use should be easy to access within the wiki itself and, ideally, form part of any training given to people who are being given access to it. If this is implemented successfully, you will not have to spend a lot of time policing activity on the wiki.

Some wikis allow the creation of templates which can be used to give a consistent structure or lay out to pages created by users. The use of these templates then becomes one of the rules of using the wiki along with who is allowed to change what and when.

Some advantages and disadvantages of having a wiki

Advantages

- Sharing information and ideas becomes easier.
- Re-inventing the wheel can be avoided.
- Gaps in available and required materials can be identified.
- Course content can be harmonised across a number of teaching centres.
- Good practise can be promoted, e.g. in lesson planning.

Disadvantages

- Monitoring and policing takes time and effort.
- Promoting the wiki needs to be organised together with training.
- Quality control can be difficult and poor content can discourage other users.
- Not everybody wants to share their materials and ideas.
- Resistance can develop if there is a perception that use of the wiki is being imposed from above rather than users being handed control of it themselves.

One free, easy-to-use wiki provider is Wikispaces. This wiki was chosen by BESIG (Business English Special interest group) and is used by teachers across the world to share information on business English language teaching materials.
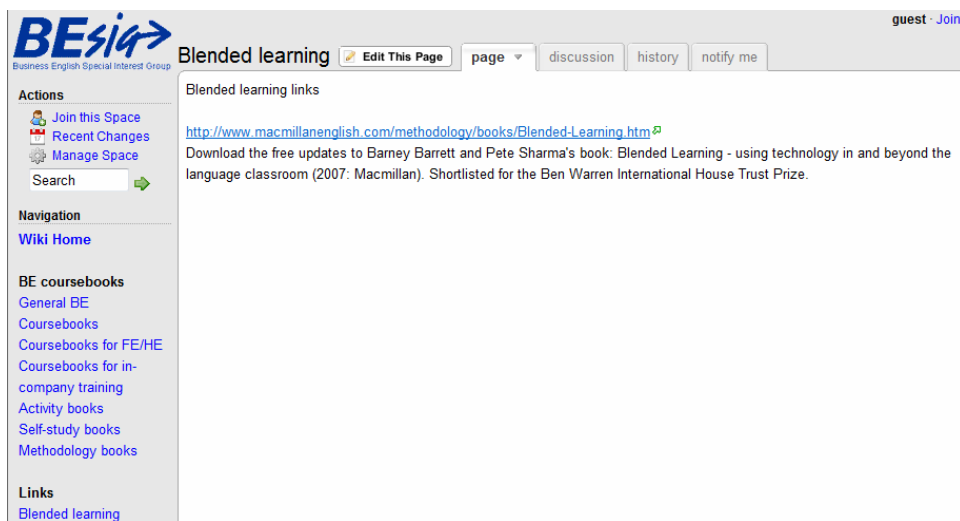

Figure 1: wiki page – BESIG wiki (Business English Special Interest Group)

Mind mapping software

A **mind map** is a well-known diagram frequently used in brainstorming and note-taking. They are useful in organizing and representing complex ideas, and can be especially helpful for visual learners when reviewing a subject area. Mind maps consist of a central key word or idea, often written inside a circle. Associated words and ideas are then linked to this circle, usually by lines or 'branches'. Mind maps are generally drawn in 'landscape' format, and can include pictures and diagrams.

There is a range of mind-mapping software, programs which enable users to create a mind map on computer. By clicking on a symbol, usually a plus sign, a new line or branch is created, and you can then type in text. It is possible to change the colours of the text, and move the branches around the screen. There are demo versions of mind mapping software available on the web, and also full versions available for a limited trial period. One site worth visiting is that of Tony Buzan, who patented the original version of Mind Maps®. See: http://www.imindmap.com/

The teacher can elicit ideas from the students and build up the mind map in class using a computer and electronic data projector. The mind map can then be saved and printed off later as a handout. In ESP, a popular activity with a new group is to ask them to create a mind map of their specialist field. The resulting handout can be used as a needs analysis – which area(s) does the group wish to focus on during the course? Which area would participants like to give a presentation on?

Two products I have been investigating are MindVisualizer™ and Inspiration®. Both are very easy to use. In a Learner training session on 'reading skills', I gave my students a half-completed mind map, and asked them finish it in pairs / small groups. I then added the students' ideas to original document and printed it off as a handout.
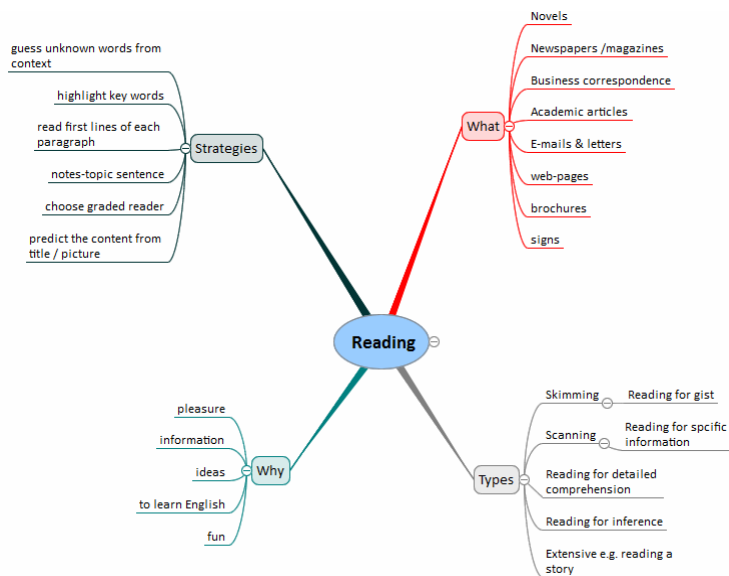

Figure 2: Handout – Reading skills – created with MindVizualizer™

The recent book *Science* (Macmillan 2008) by Keith Kelly originates from the CLIL stable ('content and language integrated learning'). Topics include energy, biology, metals and plastic. The CD-ROM provides teachers and students with simple, intuitive software to create a diagram, or 'word map'. This could be classified as 'authoring software', and allows users to create the content of their own word maps, and save them as Bitmap images. Creating a word map is an excellent way to revise for an exam and review key lexis.
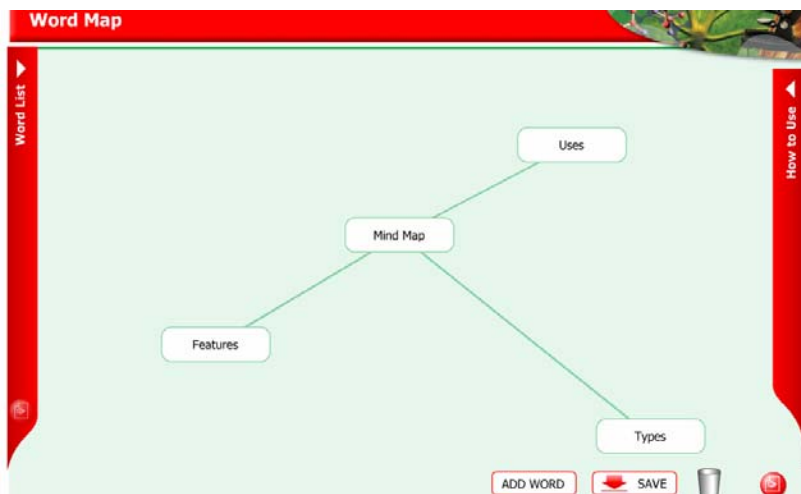

Figure 3: Word Map from Science (Macmillan)

Pete and Barney are making a number of mind maps available on their website: www.te4be.com

Acknowledgements