Using Web 2.0 Tools to Enhance Language Learning

Gilbert DIZON

Introduction

The Internet has completely reshaped how people communicate and share information with others. This change is best exemplified in Web 2.0 technologies or tools. As opposed to Web 1.0 tools such as email or websites, "Web 2.0 technologies exploit the participatory potential of the Web" (Wang & Vásquez, 2012, p. 412). While there is some debate regarding the actual definition of Web 2.0 (e.g. Bloch, 2008; Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Weiter, 2008), Tu, Blocher, and Ntoruru (2008) definite it as "a Web technology that aims to enhance creativity, information sharing and collaboration among users" (p. 336). This includes tools such as blogs, wikis, social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, and folksonomies. The benefits and possible applications of three of these technologies - blogs, wikis, and Facebook - will be outlined in this paper.

Blogs

Richardson (2010) describes blogs as "an easily created, easily updateable Web site that allows an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection" (p. 17). What makes them different from traditional websites is that blogs promote interaction in the form of comments from teachers as well as peers. Students can share their thoughts and opinions on a topic and receive valuable feedback from others.

Current research on blogging has shown that it can support the development of L2 writing. Armstrong and Retterer's (2008) found that Spanish-language students felt more comfortable writing in the target language and more confident conjugating L2 verbs after just one semester of blogging. Additionally, a study by Ducate and Lomicka (2005) revealed that students had positive perceptions towards blogging as a way to practice L2 vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, in study with L2 English learners in Japan, Fellner and Apple (2008) found that blogging helped promote writing fluency and lexical complexity. By the end of

the study, the average word count of the student blog entries nearly quadrupled from 31.5 to 121.9. These studies along with other research on L2 blogging (e.g. Sun & Chang, 2012, Vurdien, 2012; Wu, 2006) make it clear that it can have a significant impact on promoting L2 writing development.

There are many options available to teachers who are looking to incorporate them into the classroom including free blog-hosting sites such as Blogger.com, Wordpress.com, and Edublogs.com. Teachers can set up a class blog for their students or create an individual blog for each student. I favor the former as it allows students to truly take advantage of the interactivity that Web 2.0 tools offer. Once a blog is set up, teachers can use it as a medium for students to express themselves in the L2. A topic or writing prompt could be introduced and students could then start writing about that theme while focusing on one or more aspects of L2 writing (e.g., grammar, writing fluency, vocabulary). After students are given enough time to write about a topic, students could then be assigned to comment on other students' posts either in-class or as homework. Below is an example from a class blog I have created through Wikispaces.com. Although the name of the site implies it is only for wikis, it also can serve as a class blog through the discussion feature integrated into the site. Usernames have been blurred to protect the identities of the blog participants.

Week- 11-
Jun 23, 2014

I sometimes use Wikipedia when I collect some information for the class, find out about that I'm interested. Anyone can make or change Wikipedia article, but there are good point and bad point I think. Good point is that if we got new information, we can add them immediately and viewer can get them. However, maybe anyone add wrong information or false one, this is bad point I think.

I'll introduce Wikipedia article about Hiroshima prefecture. There are 8 references, and 187 people edited this article, and 8,844 people viewed this page in the past 60 days. I'm from Hiroshima, so I chose this article. Did you view Wikipedia article about your birthplace?

http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BA%83%E5%B3%B6%E7%9C%8C

Show more replies (22 hidden)

Jun 23, 2014
Come on to Hiroshima^^

Jun 23, 2014
Okonomiyaki is very popular to tourists!

Jun 23, 2014
i want to go there

Jun 23, 2014
@tatsunori

Figure 1. Example of a student blog post.

The post above received a total of thirty-four comments from seventeen different participants. This amount of participation and interaction is not uncommon in class blogs because they "ask readers to think and to respond. They demand interaction" (Richardson, 2010, p. 18).

Wikis

Similar to blogs, wikis promote interaction by allowing students to collaborate with each other. However as Kessler (2009) notes, they differ from blogs in one distinct way:

> Wikis allow for the complete revision of text by any user. Thus, contribution is not a comment or response (as it might be in a blog), but an alteration to the previous contribution. This means that a wiki-based text is in a constant state of potential collaborative change (p. 80).

This key difference has led Godwin-Jones (2003) to state "wikis are intensively collaborative" (p. 15). Therefore, wikis are an ideal tool to enhance collaborative learning in the classroom because they encourage students to work together in order to create, edit, and improve L2 text.

Along with blogs, wikis are the most commonly researched Web 2.0 technology (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). One such study that looked into the potential benefits of wikis is Kessler's (2009) investigation of forty non-native Speaker (NNS) English teachers in Mexico who cooperated to create and revise a wiki over a 16-week course. Based on the results of his study, Kessler (2009) found that the wiki promoted autonomous learning and enhanced the collaborative creation of information. Zorko (2009) also examined the collaborative nature of wikis in a study involving students enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at a university in Slovenia. Three students were chosen to be part of a case study based on their high-level of participation in the wikis as well as their responses to a questionnaire administered by the researcher. Similar to the results of Kessler's (2009) study, Zorko (2009) found that wikis supported collaboration through peer and student-teacher interaction.

While Wikipedia is by far the most obvious and popular place to publish wikis, it may not be the most appropriate site for L2 learners because the students themselves may be uncomfortable with creating entries in the target language that

are publicly viewable. If this is the case, Wikispaces.com is a good alternative because it allows students to create private wikis that are only viewable by the wiki or group members.

Wikis are perfect for group writing activities due to their inherently collaborative nature. Students may choose a topic to write about and create a wiki based on that theme. In order to ensure that all students within a group contribute equally, each student should be responsible for a specific section of a wiki with all of the members in charge of editing and revising. After students publish their wikis, they may read and respond to other student-created wikis as well as continue the collaborative process by providing feedback and/or revising the entries. Below is an example of a wiki created by two students on the topic of free-style football. The wiki had a total of twenty-one revisions over the course of two weeks, thus demonstrating the collaborative potential of wikis.

Figure 2. Example of a student wiki.

Facebook

Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, and Leveritt (2012) describe Facebook as "an online communication tool allowing users to construct a public or private profile in order to connect and interact with people who are part of their extended social network" (p. 1222). As Godwin-Jones (2010) points out, social networking sites like Facebook play an integral role in the social lives of young people. Therefore,

teachers need to take advantage of the fact that Facebook is already a significant part of many students' daily routines (Blattner & Fiori, 2009).

Despite Facebook's popularity, the pedagogical uses of the site have been less studied compared to other Web 2.0 tools (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). Nevertheless, current research suggests that Facebook can have a positive impact on L2 learning, especially in terms of the development of intercultural awareness. In a Facebook intercultural exchange between 75 Indonesian and Japanese university students, Bray and Iswanti (2013) found that Facebook helped promote intercultural awareness and language learning. Moreover, over three-fourths of the students in their study perceived the exchange to be fairly or very beneficial (82.9%).

An easy and convenient way to take advantage of Facebook's constructivist potential is through its *groups* feature. Three types of groups can be made: open, closed, and secret. As the name implies, open groups are publicly viewable and anyone can join them. Closed groups have more privacy in that potential members need to be invited/accepted by an administrator or another member before joining the group. While group posts can only been seen by members, closed groups are searchable through Facebook. Secret groups have the highest level of privacy - only members can find the group or see other members' posts. For classroom purposes, closed and secret groups are the most appropriate. However, there may be instances where public groups may be used if students need to communicate and share information with those outside of their own social or academic networks.

Similar to blogs, Facebook is an ideal medium for students to express their opinions and interact with others. However, Facebook's notification system supports participation to a greater degree because each student in the group is informed when a message is posted on the group page. In addition, students are notified when another member comments on one of their posts. Therefore, learners are held more accountable for their posts and are encouraged to respond to others in a timely manner.

私達はイースタンミシガン大学の学生です。

Figure 3.   Facebook group page from Japanese/American intercultural exchange.

Shown above is a screenshot from a group Facebook page between an English-language class at a Japanese university and a Japanese-language class at an American university. Not only are intercultural exchanges via Facebook a great way for students to use the target language in a meaningful way, but they also allow learners to gain a greater understanding of the target culture.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, and Facebook can help support interaction and collaboration in the L2. Thus, the author strongly recommends them in order to enhance language learning in the classroom. However, technology in itself does not inherently promote language learning. All activities, whether online- or paper-based, must have a sound pedagogy in order to have a meaningful and positive effect on students' language development.

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