

## WEB 2.0 SCENARIOS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: SHARING EXPERIENCES

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### Abstract

*"New technologies are the perfect aid to assist teachers in their "need to broaden their scope for creative pedagogical initiatives." [1]. Foreign language instruction has always had a close relationship with technology. In the early days of foreign language pedagogy, the first computers turned out to be excellent for language drills [2]. The potential of the Internet for the teaching and learning of foreign languages has grown spectacularly especially the last 6 years with the advent of the new phase of Web known as web 2.0. Web 2.0 applications have an incredible educational potential for foreign language instruction as they are basically socialization and communication tools. Although many techno phobic language teachers may still be reluctant to use technologies in foreign language they should not be suspicious about the computer taking their teaching role but they should understand that this can complement and implement their own teaching. What it is important is to understand that integrating technology into teaching requires the combination of adequate technical skills and sound pedagogical foundations. Using technology does not mean that one knows intuitively how to use it as a teaching tool. Adequate training and good practice can give the possibility to educators to acquire all the necessary skills so that they can realise the instructional potential of technology. Their ultimate aim should be to assist learners in their need to develop strategies of knowledge processing as in the era of knowledge society the traditional model of learning has been replaced by other models in which learner plays mostly the role of an active constructor of knowledge [3]. This paper discusses firstly the importance of the integration of web 2.0 applications in the Foreign Language Curriculum. Secondly, it presents some practical web 2.0 scenarios as they have been tried in Foreign Language Classroom that combine different web 2.0 tools in order to assist the language learner's autonomy, support the collaboration and promote the more effective acquisition of language proficiency.*

### 1. Introduction

People use language(s) everyday. However, learning a foreign language is an intensive and time-consuming activity. After years of experience in training field agents, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) estimates that anywhere from 600 to 1,320 hours of full-time instruction are needed to reach a level of high fluency, depending on the language [4]. Despite the effort and the time needed people try to learn languages and the reasons for doing so are varied. Nowadays, in the era of the Knowledge society language competencies and intercultural skills will more than ever be a part of the key qualifications needed to live and work in this new reality. The integration of new technologies into language learning is a necessary step to ensure the acquisition of this kind of skills and competencies [5]. In fact, the nature of the global society has changed the way we generally approach language learning. To learn a language is no longer something that can be done only at language schools and



technology has made the big difference in this. The potential of the Internet for the teaching and learning of foreign languages has grown spectacularly especially the last 6 years with the advent of the new phase of Web known as web 2.0. Web has changed from a medium to a platform, from a read-web to a read-write-web, there by fulfilling Berners-Lee's original vision of the Web [6]. We are now more connected than ever and anyone can create, upload and share information. Web 2.0 applications have an incredible educational potential for foreign language instruction as they are basically socialization and communication tools. Increasing contact with the target language appears to be one of the most critical factors for successful language learning and Web 2.0 applications if used wisely, can play a major role in enhancing all language learners' contact with the target language, regardless of their study abroad experiences. The question that arises is which applications to choose and how to introduce and apply them in a fruitful way in the language classroom so that we can have the most beneficial impact of them? First of all it is important to take under consideration that different technologically based tools render different advantages for learning a language. There isn't one technology best suited for language study, but rather an array of technological tools that can be harnessed to that end, although the tools themselves will continue to change very rapidly. Furthermore, it is important to point out that technology cannot make miracles as everything depends on how it is used in the curriculum.

Having all this in mind, we could say that researchers and teachers try to experiment new methodological and didactic approaches to make the best use of these new powerful web 2.0 tools. There is a big variety of web 2.0 technologies but a short number of them has been introduced in the language classroom and usually in the context of English Language Learning. The most known web 2.0 tools that are implemented in the language classroom are blogs, wikis and podcasting. In the next paragraphs of this paper we will present and discuss some practical web 2.0 scenarios as they have been tried in Foreign Language Classroom, that combine different web 2.0 tools in order to assist the language learner's autonomy, support the collaboration and promote the more effective acquisition of language proficiency.

## **2. Web 2.0 Technologies in Education: A sea of dynamic alternatives to traditional teaching and learning**

### **2.1 Sails & Wings – An e-Experience**

The case conducted as part of our research consisted in a series of language learning activities developed for a cohort of Advanced English as a Foreign Language learning students of a specific institution. These were military personnel, attending a promotion course as part of their Professional Development Plan as provided by the Portuguese Navy.

Parallel to the structured curriculum imposed by the Language office, several online learning activities were developed and applied in the classroom context in order to create more dynamic learning opportunities and thus engage the learners in a more contextualized way. Hence, the 11 students, averaging 24 years of age, that were taking the course were asked to participate in a set of tasks related with their institution. The chosen topic was Naval Aviation, being one of the final purposes to create learning situations in which the learners would not only develop a better understanding about the institution they chose to study in, but also acquire technical language knowledge, namely vocabulary (naval jargon) in English which would be of use for their future career.

The challenge set forward consisted in researching and creating a bibliographical resource about the last living aviator of the Portuguese Navy, as to pay tribute to this high ranking officer who was celebrating his 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the same institutions these learners had just been welcomed to. Associating the learning and practice of a language to a context they were part of but which they had yet to explore to get a better understanding about, seemed to boost the motivation of the learners, which was one of the intentions of the project.

Through a set of guidelines and continuous supervision, the students were given control over the project. They focused on researching the naval life of this officer, mainly via resources available in the naval archive, but also complemented by information his family was able to provide via email upon request. They decided on the title of the project, which would also end up being the original URL of the resource. They engaged on creating a digital presence for this prominent figure in the Navy as a collaborative effort. Through the supervision of the teacher the students gathered and discussed information in class, trying to make sense of it and learning about the life of their superior. Next, they



were commissioned to think up ideas on how to develop the digital presence. What started by being a plain resource – the initial plan was to create a simple website – evolved into a more complex structure, as both teachers and students decided to experiment different ways and tools which would allow them to capture better the life of the Aviator they were studying. Hence, to the initial idea of a website, a podcast with messages of appreciation were added, shorts texts (letters from the students were written) and a bibliography was published in a Wikipedia page. Impressed by the work of the students, a fellow classroom decided to collaborate in the project by also podcasting messages of appreciation and collaboration in the production of a short photostory where students engaged in describing some of the traits that characterized the life and personality of the officer they were studying. All of these resources were aggregated in a easy-to-do website.

Once the project was finished, students created a CD with all the content which was then sent to the aviator's family. To the students' surprise, one of the family members not only provided feedback on their project, but also contributed to the podcast addressing all the members involved in the project.

This not only amazed the learners, but created a stronger sense of achievement in the students at different levels. Firstly, the students' work was valued by the audience they had mainly target at. Secondly their work, developed in the language they were learning, had been understood and used by an audience external to the classroom. Finally, their product was being validated by a 'real audience, i.e., people they didn't know but who were accessing it.

### 2.1.1 Lessons learnt

The online publication of the products developed during their work (the website, the Wikipedia entry, the podcast and the photostory) gave the learners a greater sense of achievement. They were making their work known to a wider audience and they were taking responsibility for it. The fact they had ownership over the project and were given leeway to put into practice some of their ideas, under the supervision of the teacher, was meaningful, and helped maintaining the motivation of the class as a coherent group, who simultaneously collaborated to achieve the joint goal and learn 'their' the language.

Despite the fact that the activities might have been regarded as quite simple for this cohort of advanced language students, they proved to be stimulating language exercises, as the students had to research, produce the artefacts and negotiating meaning using the language they were studying.

By doing so, they not only developed their language fluency, they also acquired new information and actively developed new knowledge by developing their own content and engaging in such scenarios.

The use of ICT had a major impact in the way the classes were conducted, the teacher was able to develop the activities, and the students were able to respond to the challenges set forward. Furthermore, it allowed the teacher to engage the class in a relevant context, which they could relate to, as part of their professional activity, and achieve real communication with the students.

According to some of the students' statements, this was a very positive learning experience. It not only put them in contact with real situations, a real audience. It also gave them a sense of purpose by being able to create and publish the product of their classroom participation to a wider audience. The fact that the classes were designed to be student-centred and adopted a more informal approach, was also important in the development of the class' dynamics and the students' involvement as a coherent group.

Above all, the development of a pedagogical strategy anchored in a social learning approach and supported by the use of participatory media enabled the design of contextualized learning, which seems to be the idea scenario for the learning languages.

### 2.2 Web 2.0 practices for Italian & Spanish Language Learning: Case study 'ItalsWebQuest' & 'españolWebQuest'

A collaborative blended language learning model which proposes *webquest* projects with blog warm-up activities and a wiki used as a platform of collaborative language learning is another practical web 2.0 scenario applied in language classroom that will be presented in this section.

The purpose of this study was: (a) to test the applicability of wiki technology in teaching/learning Italian as a Foreign Language at the university level as an environment of collaborative learning that can increase motivation, participation, and collaboration among students; (b) to explore in which ways (to communicate, write in collaboration, etc) and in what frequency the students used the wiki



environment; (c) to explore the potentials of a blended learning model in a foreign language course which introduces for the first time online warm up blog activities in *webquest* projects that take place online in a wiki environment and in face-to-face lessons. The results of the in-depth study also aim to shed light (d) on the impact of this blended language leaning scenario (approaches and tools) on students' level of satisfaction compared with their prior learning experiences of traditional class teaching.

### 2. 2.1 The Web 2.0 activities in 'action'

The case study was part of a seminar course named "Introduction of Internet and Web 2.0 tools in the language classroom" and it was conducted at the Department of Italian and Spanish Language and Literature, at the faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens. The participants in this case study were 40 advanced students and basically future Italian and spanish language teachers of the Department of Italian and Spanish Language and Literature, at the faculty of the Liberal Arts of the University of Athens. Most of these students attended a different year of Italian studies but they all had an advanced level in Italian language. All of them before the basic technology training, they had none or limited experience with technology. Regarding their gender, most of them were women (90%) and regarding their age, 75% of them were in their early twenties, whereas there was a variety of ages from 25 to 50 years old in the remaining 25%. Collection of data included both quantitative and qualitative methods. Pre and post questionnaires, informal group interviews, teacher's observation lessons diaries, wiki's history pages were the instruments that were used to gather the data of this study.

The course took place during the fall semester 2007-08. The research was conducted over a four week period during the last month of the semester. The course was divided in two parts. The first part included the students' theoretical and practical introduction to the use of internet in education, the Web 2.0 tools and their educational use in the language teaching/learning. There was a focus on the instructional and learning approaches that can make the best use of this new technology. So, after the students practiced their basic computer skills and the Web 2.0 tools, they continued with a simple introduction in the creation of *webquest* projects.

The second part included the study discussed in this article: a series of blended lessons which focused on different cultural topics in which there were presented different aspects of Italian culture such as cinema, music, cities, art, cuisine, festivities and traditions. Each topic was completed in four lessons, two online and two face-to-face lessons alternatively. The duration of each course topic was two weeks. Before the beginning of the study the tutor divided the class into five groups of five members.

During the first on-line lesson, there was a series of online blog warm up online activities where there was an introduction of the cultural topic for example cinema on which would be based the *webquest* activity at the next lesson. This activity had to be completed in a week.

In the second face-to-face lesson at the department's laboratory, there was an introduction to the *webquest* project. *Webquest* activities had a beginning in class where there was a presentation of all the steps of the project, the division of the class in groups of four and the distribution of the different roles. Each member of the group had a concrete role to play separately in their project and all the members together had to create and present a final work at the end based on the personal findings of each member. The tool that was used for the creation and publication of the *webquest* projects online is called *teachersweb*.

The third on-line lesson had one week duration and it took place in the online wiki environment created with the tool [wikispaces](#) and this was used as a safe closed environment where students could have access only with password and the tutor was the responsible administrator of the space. '*Italswebquest*' and '*españolWebQuest*', were the two wiki classes that were created for the students of the Italian and Spanish language each. Every group had its space in wiki's class where it could work collaboratively using the forum and publish its final work in its group's space. The progress of the work could be easily controlled by the tutor and every student could ask the tutor any questions in the group's space during the week.

In the fourth face-to-face lesson at the department's laboratory, each representative of a group presented orally in Italian/Spanish language the final group work. The presentation could be supported by slides but it was not obligatory. After the group's presentations the lesson closed with a class



discussion. The final groups' works were available on the wiki environment and everyone could read them or add a comment or more material.

### **2.3 Results**

Referring to the first research question, initial results indicated that there was observed a great collaboration attitude from the beginning of the study and a gradual increase of students' motivation and participation during the study. Students collaborated on writing the final report of the *webquest* projects using their group wiki space and communicated about the process of their work in the discussion area of their groups using only the target language.

Regarding the second research question, the tutor noted that the students used the wiki to communicate with each other and their fellow students on their group work, for downloading tutors' notes or getting informed on the course's activities, more than asking guiding questions for problems occurred. Some students used the wiki environment during the face to face lessons and many groups exchanged their ideas in class more than on line. Many of them were discussing within their group or other groups about some technical difficulties they had and this caused an impact on the frequency of their use of wiki environment. Generally, most of the students managed to use successfully the basic potentials of wikis as it was asked; elaborating a group text and discuss in the group's discussion area.

As far as the third research question is concerned students experienced sometimes technical problems as logging in, simultaneous editing or losing writing material at the moment that they were writing. That affected them sometimes negatively on their procedure of learning because they lost time and caused them a little bit of stress. Also it is worth mentioning, that blog was a tool that was characterized as more friendly in use for the 70% of them whereas the 50 % of the total would continue to use it for personal reasons too.

Referring to the last research question, results showed that satisfaction levels for the implemented blended learning scenario of the 88% of the students were very high, Despite all these problems they enjoyed the experience and they would like to experiment wiki tool in future classes too. The possibility of having such an interesting collaborative class work and the potential to communicate with each other and the tutor in the foreign language without limits of time and space were the basic reasons. The 90% of the students wouldn't change this learning experience with a traditional language learning lesson.

## **Conclusions**

Both web 2.0 scenarios for Language Learning that have been described in this paper confirm that the dynamic that web 2.0 tools can bring in the language classroom is really powerful. In fact, the implementation of web 2.0 tools in Language classroom not only can get learners in touch with authentic written and spoken language but also assist the language learner's autonomy, support the collaboration and promote the more effective acquisition of language proficiency. Furthermore, learners can have the opportunity to use web 2.0 technologies as 'tools' for them to continue their learning beyond the classroom experience and in context.

Learning a language needs time and effort. Technology can support efficiently this learning process engaging learners to an exciting learning journey in which they are the leaders. Only practice can give us the knowledge of the positive impact of technology in learning and this is what we invite language teachers to do. Try and share their web 2.0 experiences because the best learning of all comes from 'hands on' experience. As Confucius said "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

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