



Language Teachers in Virtual Worlds: or How to Create a Digital Euphoria with Web 2.0 Tools, Interactive Boards and Mash Ups

Francesca Ripamonti

E-mail: f.ripamonti@fastwebnet.it
Liceo Scientifico Statale "G.Gandini", (Italy)

Abstract

Today's students are wired to learn. By the time they begin school, they are already astute users of technology, from channel surfing to websites to digital cameras, mp3 players and cell phones. Today's classrooms need to meet students where they are—as high-tech learners.

Studies consistently show that when teachers teach with interactive tools, today's wired students learn better and their test scores improve more successfully because interactive contents spark interest, engage attention and foster learning. Web 2.0, interactive whiteboards and mash-ups are, therefore, new solutions giving teachers flexible, versatile tools that keep pace with the demands of today's students. Moreover, by delivering true interactive performance, students are engaged with high-tech multimedia, multisensory, multidimensional lessons. Success and motivation are granted.

This presentation will explain how a "dull" theory-based course can be enlivened with the use of Web 2.0 Tools and Technologies . The presenter will demonstrate the entire process and will offer an opportunity for hands-on experience with the Web2.0 tools moving from primary to higher classes.

The Virtual and Language activities will: challenge Intelligences; adjust perspectives; fight techno daemons; explore unimagined spaces ... sometimes Alone ... but mostly together; leave aMAZEd and lost in virtual spaces; gain some mastery over the virtual kingdom; take flight for language learning; visit far away places; offer immersion into cultures; speak foreign tongues; engage in discussions; teach and learn as a team; share expertiseand share success!

1. Introduction

Twenty years ago, having a computer in your classroom—or your school—was a mark of distinction. The idea of bringing the high-tech into schools was still somewhat cutting edge. But today, things are different. In fact, no school seems complete without a full complement of desktop computers, as well as other relatively new forms of technology. The question is not whether computers belong in classrooms, but how they can be put to the most effective use and how schools can ensure that all of their students are getting the same online opportunities.

While technology within schools has expanded at a rapid rate, less-dramatic change has been apparent in the ability of teachers and administrators to use technology effectively. Some research indicates that teachers continue to use computers to maintain their current teaching methods rather than to promote innovative practices. The consequence is that, despite the schools' evident commitment to technology, there are still many educators that do not know how to take advantage of the digital and virtual access in the classrooms.

2. Why "Virtual Worlds"?

New technology is shaping our daily experiences: it is becoming increasingly important in both our personal and professional lives, and our students are using it more and more. Starting from an early age, children have an average of six media devices in their bedrooms, most teen agers have a mobile, use the internet connection, have access to a digital camera and a webcam and have a profile on a social network.

The first step, then? Take the plunge! No matter if you feel an "ICT-beginner" teacher far less skilled and knowledgeable than your students. Try, instead, to bridge the gap, now.

Being digital immigrants, who have come late to the world of technology, does not mean being eternally wary of these new developments. Very often a large part of the negative attitudes teachers have towards technology is usually the result of a lack of confidence or training, resulting in an inability to see the benefits of using technologies in the classroom.

Using a range of web tools is a way to bring the outside world in the classroom and that may become as natural as the use of books and papers. After all virtual worlds offer many advantages as they:

- are increasingly mobile and can be used not only in the classroom, but also at home, on the way to school and in Internet cafés
- are easy and affordable
- are immediately accessible to an unlimited numbers of users
- have direct access to web resources
- present rapid dissemination of knowledge and information to a worldwide audience
- offer excellent opportunities for **collaboration** and **communication** between learners who are geographically dispersedand teachers, as well!

2.1 Skills and equipment for getting started

How do I get started with them? How do they work? What do I need to know to be able to use technology in my classroom? Well. You do **not need to have any specialist technical knowledge or skills**, much as you don't need to be a mechanic to know how to drive a car! The basic skills you do need to have in place before you start are :

- how to use a simple Word Processing Program
- how to use email
- how to access and use the Internet
- how to use an Interactive Board

In order to start to implement **virtual worlds** with your students and get the most out of your activities you will also need some essential equipment :

- an Internet connection
- a printer
- an audio card in the computer and a headset (audio and microphone)
- a **web browser**
- an email program
- an Interactive Board

It is worth bearing in mind that the best way to get your feet wet with **virtual learning tools and environments** is to spend some time trying and checking them out, helped by some "expert" colleagues or by your students themselves.

3. Which "Euphoria"?

"Euphoria" is a term which has been applied to the world of technology but whose etymology and meaning will explain the purpose of this work

3.1 Euphoria for Technology

The MacMillan Online Dictionary defines **Euphoria** as "a feeling of great happiness that usually lasts for a short time only". Thus, from one side **euphoria** (from Greek, *euphoros*=healthy + *pherein*= to bear) refers to the rapture, joy and exhilaration of being involved in motivating tasks implying virtual worlds. From the other side **euphoria** implicitly indicates the brevity of the excitement and consequently the necessity to re-create new tasks or activities to feel as enthusiastic as before.

Similarly, the same **euphoria** should be experienced by those teachers who are interested in using **technology in language teaching**. They should feel excited about implementing **free Web 2.0 type tools** in their English classrooms, but they should also bear in mind that these tools are just the **tip of the iceberg** and they should not be considered in anyway conclusive or even the 'best of' Web 2.0 tools. New tools are emerging all the time, many not originally intended for education, but which can be put to good use by teachers and students alike to extend opportunities, enhance learning potential and develop the level of **digital literacy** that students –and teachers- will need for the 21st century.

3.2 Euphoria for Language Teaching through Technology

Technology in language teaching is not new. Indeed, technology has been around language teaching for decades. Computer-based materials have moved beyond the use of computer programs to embrace the use of the Internet and web tools. Today, the use of **technology** in the language classroom is becoming increasingly important and it will become a normal part of ELT practice in the coming years: hopefully, a common **euphoria**!

There are many reasons for this:

- Internet access –either in private homes, or at Internet cafés- is getting increasingly available to learners
- English, as an international language is being used in technologically mediated contexts
- Technology, especially the Internet, presents us with new opportunities for **authentic tasks**, as well as access to a wealth of **ready –made ELT materials**
- Technology offers new ways for **practicing language** and **assessing performances**
- Using a range of web tools can give learners exposure to and practice in all of the **four main language skills**-*speaking, listening, writing and reading*

4. Language teachers and Web 2.0, Interactive Boards and Mash-up

This paper will also explore how the use of technology through **Web 2.0 tools**, **Interactive Bards** and **Mash-ups** might be extended to develop and enhance good practice in the teaching and learning of English, regardless of one's technical *know-how*.

4.1 Web 2.0 tools

The term **Web 2.0** is commonly associated with web applications that facilitate **interactive information sharing**, user-centered design and **collaboration** on the *World Wide Web*. A **Web 2.0 tool** gives its users the **free choice to communicate** with each other in a virtual community or dialogue. Examples of Web 2.0 tools include *social-networking sites, blogs, wikis, video-sharing sites, hosted services, web applications and folksonomies*. Web 2.0 websites allow users to do more than



just retrieve information. By increasing what was already possible in "**Web 1.0**", they provide the users with more user-interface, software and storage facilities, all through their **browser**.

4.2 Interactive White Boards

An **interactive whiteboard (IWB)**, is a large interactive display connected to a computer and projector. A projector projects the computer's desktop onto the board's surface where users control the computer using a pen, a finger or other devices. The board can be used at all levels of education since it provides a **variety of media** that combine reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in an **integrated manner**. Moreover, through a series of "resources" like: *capturing* notes; *clicking* and *dragging*, *annotating* a presentation and *translating* cursive writing to text, the IWB becomes an authentic **virtual learning environment** in which the use of language can be purposeful and natural.

4.3 Mash-ups

A **mashup** is a web application that uses content from more than one source to create a single new service displayed in a single graphical interface. The term **mashup** originally comes from pop music, where people seamlessly combine music from one song with the vocal track from another—thereby mashing them together to create something new.

Mashups have recently exploded on the web, for two main reasons: first, many of the major internet companies, such as *Yahoo!* www.yahoo.com, *Google* www.google.com, and *Amazon* www.amazon.com have opened up their data to be used with other data sources without a lengthy licensing negotiation. In just a minute or two, the data resources they make available can be used and set up. The other reason for this rapid growth is the advent of new tools that make creating **mashups** easy for anyone, regardless of one's technical skills. The beauty (risk?) of this web application is that it is easy to find data sources and make them available: no one needs permission.

5. Useful Tips for Creating a Digital Euphoria in the Language Classroom

In order to help teachers and students to make the most of the latest technologies and to use them during the school year, in this presentation we attempt to put together innovative tips and resources on how to **create a digital euphoria** into the language classroom. These suggestions will try to inspire educators to embrace the new-media frontier and embark on a new teaching and learning adventure to deliver the relevant and meaningful education all students deserve. It is all here: ready to go when you are...**Browser-agnostic** or **user-friendly!**

- **Break the Digital Ice.** Icebreakers are a tradition for starting the new school year. Name games or other introductory activities help teachers and students to get acquainted so that they can start building a positive learning community. Give this important classroom tradition a 21st century makeover by integrating digital tools.

Try <http://www.stixy.com/>; <http://www.dabbleboard.com/>; <http://www.twiddla.com/> to visualize, explore, collaborate and let students combine photographs or other visuals with written or audio comments.

- **Find your Classroom Experts.** Many of today's digital kids spend their time producing videos, posting to social-networking sites and text messaging their friends. Take advantage of their technical know-how in the classroom: **survey** your students to find out about their digital smarts: *Who is good at graphic design, podcasting, video editing? Who knows how to make animations?*

Online survey tools like www.zoomerang.com help make information gathering quick and easy



- **Get off to a Good Start.** The start of a new school year is the perfect time to help students get organized. A wide array of Web tools can help students get better at **managing their own learning**. As you consider which ones will offer the most value for your learners, think about the kinds of activities they will take part this year. *Will they need to work on multimedia resources? Manage various topics? Collaborate on school projects? Dig into research?* www.google.com/ig and www.netvibes.com can serve as virtual desktops, keeping their digital tools in a handy place. They can customize their start pages with the **widgets** or **news feeds** they need. www.thinkquest.org features an **online learning platform** where students and teachers can collaborate.

- **Think Globally** – Turn your classroom into a gateway for learning about the world and help your students see themselves as **global citizens**. One of the fastest way to expand your students' horizon is simply to connect your class with students who live somewhere else in the world. You can find willing partners on **socialnetworking sites** that cater to educators, such as Classroom 2.0 <http://www.classroom20.com/> or the Global Education Collaborative <http://gloaleducation.ning.com/>.

Once you find a partner, tools like Google Earth www.earth.google.com will give a street level look at each other's neighborhoods.

- **Enjoy Writing.** Make your classroom into an inviting space for writing. Collaborative tools can help your students to win their writing weaknesses or improve their skills. Try CoSketch <http://cosketch.com/> which is a **multi-user online whiteboard** designed to give users the ability to quickly visualize and share ideas as images. www.thinkquest.org features an **online learning platform** where students and teachers can collaborate. Similarly with <http://www.wallwisher.com/> you can create an online notice board to provide a place for students to share websites or other **assignments** they have created or to create a wall for students to discuss lectures, news articles, literary pieces or videos.

- **Make Meaning from Word Display.** Whether they are mastering scientific vocabulary, writing poems or analyzing presidential speeches, students are immersed in words. Encourage lively conversation about words with the help of tools that turn texts into **visual displays**. www.wordle.net is a free tool that turns a block of text, or simply a list of words, into a **cloud pattern**. <http://quizlet.com/> allows you and/or your students to create **online flashcards** covering every possible subject. After creating the flashcards there are several options for learning the vocabulary: definitions, questions, games and quizzes.

- **Work Better with Music.** To help your students use the language, try playing songs, lyrics or look for bands. There are safe online tools for dealing with music. If you teach kids, <http://jitterbug.tv/> offers songs from TV or Movies favourites. Also an **intercultural approach** is granted if you download "Music from other Lands". Similarly you can get your students to listen to the <http://www.national-anthems.net/> a site dedicated to national mp3anthems from countries and territories linked to brief information about countries and territories.

6- Conclusions

After trying these web tools whether lasting or short your digital euphoria will be, one point will be surely certain: **virtual worlds** offer language learners both collaborative and game-like opportunities. As such, virtual worlds become **motivating** because propose distinct (although combinable) learning experiences which are **immersive** (because students are surrounded by a certain -real or fictitious- environment that can stimulate language learning); **social** (because learners can meet others, either to informally practice a language or to participate in more formal classes) and, definitely, **creative** (because the approach to language learning in virtual worlds is that of



constructing objects as part of a language learning activity, simply following one's **learning** and **cognitive styles**).

References :

- [1] Terry T & Chen I, (2009) *Wired for Learning: An Educator Guide to Web 2.0*. IAP, Information Age Publishing, Inc, Charlotte NC
- [2] Martin D. (2009) *Activities for Interactive Whiteboards*, Helbling Languages.
www.helblinglanguages.com
- [3] Dudeney G & Hocky N. (2008) *How to Teach English with Technology*, Pearson Longman, Harlow, England
- [4] Boyle, T., (2001) *Towards a theoretical base for educational multimedia design*, Journal of Interactive Media in Education, <http://www.jime.open.ac.uk/>
- [5] Pegrum, M. (2005). *Speed kills: Slowing down online language teacher training*. In B. Beaven (Ed.), *IATEFL 2005: Cardiff Conference Selections* (156-158). Canterbury: IATEFL
- [6] Boss S. *New Media, New Tools...and a New Educational Resource* in www.edutopia.org
- [7] Fresco A. (2009) "Tecnofobia o Tecnofilia", in LANG MAG n.2 Sett.2009
- [8] Burchietti E, *How a Real Context and ICT increased Motivation in Fifth Graders*, in TESOL Italy Newsletter, March-April 2010
- [9] Cobb J., *15 Free Online Collaboration Tools and Apps*,
<http://www.missiontolearn.com/2009/08/free-online-collaboration/>