Using Weblogs in Foreign Language Classrooms: Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract

Over the past few years, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies such as weblogs, wikis, and social networks has created new opportunities and challenges in the field of foreign language learning. The characteristics of Web 2.0, which facilitate interactive information sharing, user-centered designs, and online collaboration, are recognized to have great potential for more effective teaching and learning foreign languages. Consequently, a growing number of researchers and teachers have been exploring the ways to integrating various Web 2.0 technologies into foreign language classrooms. Weblogs have become one of the best-received Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language education. This study explores the significant issues of using Weblogs in foreign language learning, examining the theoretical justification of using Web 2.0 in foreign language learning, identifying possibilities and challenges of weblogs implemented in foreign language classrooms, and discussing advantages and disadvantages of using weblogs.

Keywords: Weblogs, Web 2.0, Foreign language learning, Web-based learning

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies such as Weblogs, wikis, and social networks has radically changed education in general, creating new opportunities for foreign language learning and teaching. The spread of Web 2.0 is not simply technological phenomenon but a social one that introduced entirely new approaches to generate and distribute web content. With the characteristics of Web 2.0, which facilitate interactive information sharing, user-centered designs, and online collaboration, a growing number of researchers and teachers have been exploring the ways to facilitate language learning by integrating various Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language classrooms. Among various Web 2.0 technologies, weblogs have been increasingly implemented in foreign language education across contexts owing to their interactive and public aspects. To date, various studies have pointed out the benefits and limitations of using Weblogs in foreign language learning. This study intends to examine the theoretical aspects of using Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language learning, to identify possibilities and challenges of weblogs implemented in foreign language classrooms, and to discuss advantages and disadvantages of using weblogs.

2. Theoretical Justification of Using Web 2.0

For last decades, significant theoretical paradigm shift have been occurring in the field of foreign language learning. The focus of research and pedagogy has shifted from a cognitive orientation to a social orientation, from classroom contexts to naturalistic settings, and from L2 learning to L2 use [1]. Together with these changes, concepts such as input, interaction, authenticity, and collaboration are recognized as critical factors to determine successful foreign language learning. Furthermore, negotiation of meaning in
authentic contexts is considered as an imperative for language learning to occur. Interestingly, this paradigm shift in foreign language learning shares many of the fundamental attributes of Web 2.0 such as collaboration, participation and sharing.

Web-based foreign language learning started back in the early 90s, but it had limited benefits since it was mainly based on Web 1.0 which is characterized as non-participatory, static, read-only entity. In contrast, Web 2.0 technologies provide environments where users can communicate and collaborate in active manners. Two major features that distinguish Web 2.0 from Web 1.0 are the platform-based usage of the Internet, harnessing of collective intelligence, and rich user experiences. In the Web 2.0 framework, the web functions as the platform where users collaborate, exchange and data dynamically (see Table1) [2]. Thus, web 2.0 technologies such as weblogs, podcasts, wikis, and YouTube provide language learners with the potential for a collaboration-oriented and community-based learning environment. Among these innovative Web 2.0 technologies, weblogs are best received in field of education in general and foreign language education owing to their unique features.

Table 1. Web 1.0 vs. Web 2.0

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web 1.0</th>
<th>Web 2.0</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Web as Read-only</td>
<td>Web as Read-Write.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web as Medium</td>
<td>Web as Platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web of geeks and techies</td>
<td>Web of anyone willing to try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web as Broadcast</td>
<td>Web as Conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web as Static</td>
<td>Web as Dynamic</td>
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</tbody>
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3. Characteristics of Weblogs

Weblogs, defined as free user-friendly websites that are easily created, maintained, and updated without any knowledge of HTML, offer huge possibilities for innovative learning in classrooms, across disciplines and in various levels. To understand characteristics of weblogs, features that distinguish weblogs from other commonly used web-based communicative tools will be first discussed and then the unique features of weblogs will be presented

3.1. Weblogs vs other Asynchronous Web-Based Communication Tools

As a commonly used asynchronous web-based communication tool, weblogs share some similar features with other asynchronous communicative applications such as email, discussion forums, and web pages. However, weblogs possess their own unique features.

One of the most significant aspects of weblogs is that weblogs can be viewed by anyone on the web. This viewability of weblogs by a broad audience distinguishes them clearly from email. Weblogs are also different from discussion forums in that they are individually or group owned. Weblogs can easily include hyperlinks, images and video clips while the forum mainly consists of plain texts or attached files.

3.2. Unique Features of Weblogs

Weblogs typically share the following features:

- Individual ownership: individual bloggers are responsible for publishing the blog content, moderating readers’ comments, deciding the rights of the readers, and customizing the look and feel of the blog.
- Updates displayed in reverse chronological order: A typical blog places the latest posting at the top of the page. Older posts appear further down the latest post.
This systematic reverse chronological display of the postings makes it possible for users to access the latest posting immediately when logging on the blogs.

- Archival of postings. Weblogs auto-archived older posts, placing newer posts on the top of the blog. Over time, the blog will continue to grow, but the weblogs only captures a certain fixed number of recent posts on the site and older posts are no longer shown. Archived Older posts can be accessed elsewhere on the site via a permanent hyperlink or permalink.

These unique features of weblogs have various characteristics that attract language educators and learners [3].

- Relevance: Weblogs allow teachers and learners to upload content relevant to their courses and promote student-teacher, student-student, and student-others interactions about the postings.
- Accessibility: Weblogs are accessible to whoever is interested in making contributions in a relatively long period of time without moving physically or attending face-to-face classes.
- Interactivity: Weblogs can be accessible to other blogs through a list of links to selected blogs, or an RSS feed enables bloggers to subscribe to other blogs and monitor their activities.
- Interest: Weblogs give students equal chances to participate, which have the potential to enhance learners’ voluntary contributions.

With these characteristics, weblogs not only facilitate exchanging information and expanding communication but also provide learners with possibilities to enhance their language learning.

4. Using Weblogs in Foreign Language Classrooms

Weblogs have been used in many foreign language classrooms in different ways. A variety of classifications can be made to how weblogs can facilitate language learning, but Campbell (2003)’s three categories for language learning blogs based on their technical structure are widely used: the tutor weblog, the learner weblog, and the class weblog (see Table 2) [4].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Weblog</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| Tutor          | • administered by the instructor  
|                | • encouraged learners to do reading practice and explore links for self-study. |
| Class          | • administered by the entire class  
|                | • encourages learners to post messages, images and links pertinent to classroom discussion topics |
| Learner        | • administered by the learner  
|                | • encourages individual learners to post their thoughts about the reading |

4.1. Possibilities and Challenges of Tutor Weblog

Tutor weblogs are a platform for communication between teachers and students and among teachers. A tutor weblog can have possible three functions. First, it can function as a space through which a teacher provide learners with course related information such as course syllabus, homework assignments, and assessment criteria. Second, it can function as a platform to help learners explore the Web resources in a guided manner. Third, weblogs can used to allow learners to express their ideas and opinions. This way, learners
can have additional opportunities to practice casual, informal writing styles while expressing themselves. As a result, a stronger affective bond between the learner and the teacher can be established. However, the tutor weblog tend to limit learners to post about the subject the teacher has posted. Therefore, to help learners foster the ability to express personal feelings freely, the learner weblog can be more effective.

4.2. Possibilities and Challenges of Learner Weblog

Since the learner weblogs usually function as ‘online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts’[4], they are most appropriate for reading and writing classes where the learners are encouraged to write frequently about what interests them and to make comments on other students’ blogs. In this type of class, learners have a stronger purpose to write due to the existence of a real audience. Learners in this situation tend to be more concerned about writing more correctly. Thus, they are expected to understand the value of revising their writing. As the archival function of weblogs the blog can also serve as an e-portfolio which enables the learners to return to their previous written work and to evaluate their progress made during a writing course. This way, learners can have more freedom to select the subject for their writing, which in turn can develop a sense of ownership of their writing. Despite these advantages, the learner weblog imposes the extra workload on teachers to monitor learners’ postings. Thus, another option teachers can have is a class weblog.

4.3. Possibilities and Challenges of Class Weblog

Since class weblog are managed with collaborative efforts between students and a teacher it can be used as an effective way to foster a feeling of community among the members of a class. Class weblog can be best used as a collaborative discussion space, an extra-curricular extension of the classroom, encouraging students to reflect more in depth on the topics dealt with in class. Comments and links related to classroom discussion topics assigned for homework can be posted by learners at their own pace depending on learners’ competence levels. In addition, class blog can be useful for facilitating project-based language learning. Since all the class members can access to postings, anyone can collaborate to produce and edit writing posted by anyone else in the group. In this way, class weblogs can be used as a space for peer correction and feedback and learners can develop critical reading and writing skills through collaboration on the blogs. Furthermore, since it is also possible for people outside the class to access the class weblogs, class blogs can serve as a medium for cultural exchange through writing. Learners can interact with people in other countries if the situation permits. Though this interaction, learners can practice their foreign language skills as well as acquire intercultural awareness. Participation in an authentic use of the target language for real communication can make learning experience more interesting.

5. Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Weblogs

Weblogs are asserted to have several significant advantages for learning foreign languages [5].

- Weblogs provide an authentic learning environment for real communication. Since the audience of the writing is not limited to the teacher but extends to peers and people beyond the classroom, weblogs can raise students’ awareness of audience.
- Weblogs function as online learning logs where learners record their learning experience. For teachers, this function can be used as e-polio that record learners’ progress and encourage learners to reflect on their learning experience.
Weblogs enable learners to create social networks and learning communities where they can interact and communicate their opinions and ideas. This collaboration can motivate learners to improve their writing skills.

With these advantages, weblogs can be implemented to facilitate foreign language learning in various ways. Particularly, the multi-media features of weblogs enable language learners to improve reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. For example, traditional text-based blogs simply provide learners with reading resources and opportunities to practice writing, but audio and video blogs can provide listening material together with cultural aspects related to the target language country. However, Weblogs have been used as a powerful tool to develop writing skills. Weblogs integrated in foreign language classes are reported to provide the learners with a practicing environment where learners can think, write, and reflect through interaction with their instructor and peers, and as a result can enhance their writing skills.

Various studies have reported positive effects of using weblogs on the development of learner’s writing skills. Using weblogs in foreign language classrooms:

- enhances reading comprehension, improves students’ writing skills and abilities [6].
- develops writing and learning strategies [5].
- has a positive impact on the content and increases the amount of writing of learners [7].
- makes students pay close attention to the formal aspects of writing, both in terms of word choice, structure, and word spelling, attending to sentence and paragraph structure as well as adapting academic style, register and appropriate word [8].
- Diminishes barriers to learning English by providing them the opportunity to write freely without being judged for their grammatical mistakes [9].
- develops ideas and provide feedback for the authors [10].
- enhances student analytical and critical thinking skills [11]
- increases student motivation in reading and writing, promotes learner independence and autonomy, and enhances students’ analytical and critical thinking skills [12].

While Weblogs show great potential in certain areas of language learning, there are also significant challenges. First, students with low English proficiency may experience difficulty in putting their ideas in order. Since weblog writing and peer comments are accessible by anyone, students lacking confidence in their writing ability may feel fear at having others read their thoughts, or those with developmental writing problems may be embarrassed by the possibility that others may see their mistakes. Thus, the students may initially express interest in the idea of blogging, but their opinions can change after learning of the public nature of the activity. These problems suggest that the instructor should take a more active role in assisting students during the blogging [13].

On the other hand, it is difficult to keep students’ interest in blog-based tasks. The teacher as facilitator is important for maintaining student interest since blogs work best when learners get into the habit of using them. If learners are not encouraged, blogs can quickly be forgotten [14]. In order for weblogs to work best, teachers guided learners to form the habit of using them:

- Teachers should respond to students’ posting quickly, asking questions about their postings to stimulate them to keep writing.
- Students should be actively encouraged to read and respond to their peers.
Writing to the blog could be required as part of the class assessment. Students should be encouraged to post their writing homework on the blog instead of only giving it to the teacher.

6. Conclusion

Weblogs have numerous benefits in foreign language learning. They can provide a motivating learning environment where learners can have a sense of ownership and readership. They can also be used to enhance student analytical and critical thinking skills, create social interactions between students and the instructor, students and their peers, and students and a out of class audience. However, it is important to note that technology itself does not guarantee better education or automatically make students learn. In order for weblogs to be successfully used to encourage and extend students’ learning, teachers need to guide and direct students in their use of the new technology throughout the learning process. It is essential that teachers monitor students’ interaction and provide timely intervention. That is, in addition to the attention paid to the process and products of learning, teachers should take part in students’ discussion process and give appropriate feedback when necessary to help the interactive meaningful dialogues continue to occur.

Web 2.0 environments have great potential for learning, and weblogs have been increasingly implemented in foreign language learning across contexts. Weblogs provide a genuine learning context for learners who have limited opportunities to be exposed to the target language in an authentic environment. Research findings confirm that using weblogs has positive effects on students’ writing skills, promoting learner independence and autonomy. Despite these results, many questions remain unanswered about how those possibilities can be realized. More research at using weblogs will be necessary to understand weblogs better and provide more effective learning environment that can facilitate successful foreign language learning.

References

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