Chapter III
Output-Oriented Language Learning With Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

Current thinking in SLA methodology favours knowledge construction rather than simple instructivist learning as an appropriate paradigm for language learning. Within this context, project-based and task-oriented scenarios have often been regarded as the real forte of digital media and technology-enhanced tools. Such approaches to learning are also rooted in the output hypothesis, which argue that learners should actively engage themselves in the creation of “comprehensible output” in order to develop linguistically and cognitively. Following the apparent upgrade of the Internet to Web 2.0, expectations are running high as to the innovative potential of this (supposedly) new platform for Technology Enhanced Language Learning. This chapter will discuss the principle of output orientation in language learning and consider some of the tools the “new” Internet has to offer in such an approach. It will also present a few ideas for learning projects and samples of best practice in order to show how the use of digital media can contribute both to the quality and quantity of product.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will look at the potential of digital media for output-oriented language learning with a special focus on new platforms and tools for social networking and collaborative knowledge construction and knowledge sharing available on the so-called Web 2.0. Based on Merrill Swain’s output hypothesis, first put forward in the 1985, it will be argued that learners engaged in negotiating meaningful and comprehensible output as part of language learning are very much engaged in learning experiences which foster language learners’ cognitive and linguistic growth by means of processes of reflective and collaborative learning (Swain, 1985). Considering the long tradition of exploiting computer and Internet within task-based and project-based learning, it is suggested
that social platforms such as wiki-spaces and podcasting, provide an appropriate framework for more authentic and more real-life-like learning experiences than in the past. The chapter aims to discuss both the theoretical framework and demonstrate the practicability of using digital media in innovative ways. Specific examples of such experience-oriented learning scenarios from school and university contexts, will be described in the final part of this chapter.

Digital Media have had a significant impact on the way foreign languages are being taught and learned. In recent years, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) have come of age. Consequently, Stephen Bax pointed out in 2003 that we are now at the stage of integrated CALL and TELL, where digital tools for learning have become integrated elements of foreign language syllabuses. In view of the development of even more flexible tools for social networking and knowledge sharing, this chapter also argues that the use of CALL and TELL applications has reached the stage of normalisation as much as the so-called Web 2.0 has become a common social phenomenon. However, the impact of digital media and Web 2.0 applications is by no means restricted purely to a utilitarian level and to methodological changes in classroom practice — changes which can be observed in almost any context within which languages are learnt. Rather, the growing diversity and flexibility of digital media, together with the increased ease with which the communicative, multimedia, and networking potential of computer and Internet can now be exploited, have also had a considerable influence on the deliberations concerned with the theoretical framework underlying foreign language learning methodology. Furthermore, new opportunities for research into language acquisition processes are opening up, as the tools and platforms available on the new web make traceable both the processes of creating and publishing meaningful output as well as the actual products themselves.

Computer and Internet tools can facilitate the implementation of a methodology for language learning that focuses on authenticity in contents, context, and task. Even in the earlier stages of the Internet, now often referred to as the days of Web 1.0, cognitive-constructivist approaches and participatory knowledge building were no longer just theoretical concepts but could be put into practice, drawing on the wide range of tools and applications available in digital form: “The web ... has always been an exciting place for education in terms of the possibilities it offers for research and collaboration” (Freedman, 2006, p. 13). A number of (multimedia) authoring tools have emerged over the years, which allowed for greater flexibility and authenticity, for example in the preparation and exploitation of non-textbook materials in the language classroom and beyond. However, there was still the issue of an existing technical barrier in terms of accessibility, compatibility, and user-friendliness, and the apparent upgrade of such tools to open platforms and public resources for social networking and knowledge sharing have now led to a point where the implementation of output-oriented learning scenarios within a project-based and task-based framework is more easily manageable than in the past. It is the author’s opinion that a healthy interaction between theory and practice will lead to further insight into how language learning actually works, because, as stated above, both the processes and results of learning become more tangible. Consequently, this chapter will at the outset consider the specifics and the potential of the so-called Web 2.0 for language learning and finish with the description of a few suggestions for Web 2.0 enhanced learning scenarios, with a clear focus on the production and sharing of output.

In-between these two parts, the chapter will also consider current language learning theory. A number of studies on second language acquisition processes suggest that authenticity in content, context, task, and classroom interaction are crucial