Chapter XI
Blogging for Self-Determination with L2 Learner Journals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of blogs for foreign and second language (L2) learning. It first outlines the suitability of blogs for language education and shows the value of blogging beyond technical features. Blogging has been described as a social activity (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004), which puts the writer in a central position. It will be argued that this centrality of the writer needs to be maintained in an educational context. The shift from teacher to learner orientation is seen as a significant change in language education. With reference to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) the pedagogical principles that support L2 learner autonomy in a Web 2.0 learning environment will be discussed. Using blogs as L2 learner journals, it will be shown that Web 2.0 informs and supports language learning environments which foster L2 learner autonomy. The study indicates that blog-based reflective writing increases the learners’ sense of autonomy and that it has a positive impact on L2 learners’ perception of language awareness and development.

INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 has great promise to inform new ways of language learning. The emergence of a social web, which allows L2 learners to become active participants in a learner community, opens new opportunities and presents new challenges for language education. The role of technology in language learning dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The ability to hear the native voice through recorded media (radio, film, tape) and to expose language learners to the real thing was seen as revolutionary then, but it was also threatening to those teachers who saw their role as providers of information (Cuban, 1986). Today, podcasts and video-sharing applications have not only
multiplied the offerings of resources for language learners, these technologies have also provided the potential to change educational practices. While students in the past relied on their teachers to supply learning materials, they are now able to access these resources on their own. L2 learners are able to immerse themselves in the target language by listening to their favorite podcast, by reading and placing comments on a blog of their choice or by uploading their own L2 videos on a video-sharing website (Alm, 2007b, 2007c). The Web 2.0 defining “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly, 2005, Akamai vs. BitTorrent, para. 3) allows L2 learners in principle to contribute to and to become part of a learning community that they themselves help to shape. Web 2.0 has the potential to transform established learning routines, to change the roles of teachers and learners and to enable language learners to become more involved in the learning process. This chapter discusses how the use of Web 2.0 can lead to these transformations in the L2 language classroom.

New technologies always represent an opportunity to re-evaluate current educational practices. The technology itself might well trigger new teaching approaches and open new pathways of learning, leading to new research agendas. Warschauer (2000) has shown that the parallel development of the three main educational theories (behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism) and computer development could also be applied to the language learning context. In the last 30 years computer applications have increasingly supported language learning approaches. The advent of the Internet, however, has changed the role of technology in education. The ubiquitous use of the Internet by the population at large and its suitability for communication impacts on educational needs and shapes educational practices. Warschauer (2000) observed: “It is no longer just a matter of using e-mail and the Internet to help teach English, as I wrote in my first book five years ago, but also of teaching English to help people learn to write and use the Internet” (New Contexts, para. 3).

The impact of technology on learning is increasingly recognized and has possibly found its most fervent advocate in George Siemens. Siemens (2004) sees an unparallel impact of technology on our lives, on the way we communicate with others and on the way we learn. Claiming that “technology is altering (rewiring) our brains” (Introduction, para. 4), Siemens believes that traditional learning theories have outlived their usefulness. His own theory of connectivism integrates “principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories” (Connectivism, para. 24).

While Siemens advocates a break from conventional learning approaches, Levy (2007) calls for continuity. He argues that existing theoretical, pedagogical and curriculum frameworks should be considered when researching emergent CALL: “It is vital to make links with existing CALL practice using prior research studies associated with the language skills or areas, and relevant theories of learning and acquisition” (p. 188).

Learner autonomy is a crucial part of successful L2 learning and Web 2.0 supports the creation of learning environments that foster autonomous L2 learning. Research in this area can be based on established theoretical frameworks in Second Language Acquisition (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2001) or be informed by neighboring disciplines such as activity theory (Blin, 2004) or self-determination theory (Alm, 2007a) and lead to new insights in L2 teaching and learning.

The appeal of Web 2.0 resides in its interactive infrastructure and in its user involvement. The rapid uptake of Web 2.0 technologies is a clear indication of its suitability for the sharing of information, for networking and collaboration. No longer dependant on webmasters and ICT specialists, users are able to participate in and to become part of their chosen online community. This user-focused nature of Web 2.0 is of particular interest in an educational context. The general users of Web 2.0 applications, be it in MySpace, YouTube or Blogger, are in charge