Chapter XVI

Blogging in Foreign Language Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter gives a comprehensive overview of blogs in Foreign Language Education (FLE) through reviewing literature, critically analyzing potential benefits and concerns about blogs, and suggesting research needed to better understand blogging’s influence on language learning. The chapter begins with a discussion of Web 2.0’s potential impact on FLE and a detailed description and definition of blogs. Following this a comprehensive literature review of blog use in FLE and a critical examination of blogging’s potential benefits and problems in key areas of FLE is offered. Finally, future trends for blogs and further research areas are suggested. Though blogs are a tool that have received relatively minimal attention in FLE literature to date, this chapter argues that blogs can be an important hub of learning in Web 2.0.

INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 technologies can revolutionize Foreign Language Education (FLE). Foreign language education, here including both linguistic and intercultural learning of another language, has been affected by technological advances throughout its history. Going as far back as the invention of paper and much later the printing press, to more recent technologies such as television, telephones, and computers, FLE has grown and changed (Belz, 2003a). Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was born with the computer, and grew through the initial use of the Internet. Nevertheless, while CALL before Web 2.0 offered new opportunities for language learners through foreign language learning software, word processing, email, and web pages, the defining characteristics of Web 2.0 — collaboration and interactive communication — are such critical elements of foreign language learning that a po-
potential revolution in foreign language education is imminent (Kern, 1996).

Web 2.0 is most thoroughly defined by O’Reilly (2005), a co-organizer of the first Web 2.0 conference. O’Reilly’s (2005) article points to the “web as a platform” (p. 1), the web’s “harnessing [of] collective intelligence” (p. 2), and “rich user experiences” (p. 3) among other salient characteristics of Web 2.0. These characteristics point to how active Internet users have a great influence on the applications, information and experiences to be had on the Internet. Web 2.0 is a much more organic web than Web 1.0, changing in relation to and reaction to Internet users. While prominent Internet developers such as Tim Berners-Lee have argued that Web 2.0 is nothing really new (Laningham & Berners-Lee, 2006), the possibilities for communication, collaboration and interaction on the Internet have unquestionably expanded. Because of this expansion, foreign language learning also has possibilities to change (Mandarin 2.0, 2007).

Still, while the Web 2.0 revolution insinuates change, great improvements in FLE due to Web 2.0 remain far from certain. First of all, Web 2.0 requires Internet access and computer proficiency. Though Internet access continues to increase throughout the world, there are still many people for whom Internet access is unavailable or not consistently available, and there are still many people who do not use computers proficiently. These issues are both especially of concern in institutional contexts where learning might require all students to have computer and Internet access as well as requiring a teacher proficient enough to manage an Internet-based project. Secondly, Web 2.0 offers collaboration and interaction in new ways, but how these new ways impact foreign language learning is still only beginning to be understood. On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that more people than ever find themselves interacting and collaborating with international counterparts through Web 2.0 tools like video, voice and text chat, blogs and wikis, and online gaming and online interactive worlds. On the other hand, does this activity lead to better foreign language learning than studying a textbook by one’s self or taking a language class with a skilled instructor? Despite the new connections offered in a Web 2.0 environment, how that environment is used will pervasively affect its benefits. The potential of Web 2.0 is very exciting, and hopefully that excitement will translate into thorough research and practice to create new opportunities for FLE.

This chapter examines weblogs, one of the best-known members of Web 2.0. Weblogs, commonly known as blogs, are one of the oldest 2.0 technological advances — about 10 years as of 2008 — in fact preceding Web 2.0 itself (Stauffer, 2008). Originally conceived of as online journals, blogs now contribute to society in many ways as news, research, business sites, and still as personal online journals. As such an important new communicative tool, blogs are of interest in education, specifically in FLE. In fact, as one surveys the different tools and media of web 2.0, blogs hold a special place as a center of communication, a hub where other technologies link and can be hosted. Blogs are often a user’s “home” on the web, easier to create and edit than web pages, and they can host a variety of multimedia as well as display a user’s profile, sometimes containing contact information such as email and text messaging addresses. Blogs provide an updatable template for writing, and their ubiquity on the web makes them a source of reading on innumerable topics. Despite this promise, as with Web 2.0 in general, blogs’ place as a learning tool is unclear. How exactly can this new exciting tool contribute to language education?

This chapter explores how blogging’s potential has been and can be tapped for FLE purposes. First, blogs are defined and their characteristics are examined. Second, a comprehensive overview of how blogs have been used for FLE is given. Third, blogs’ potential benefits and limitations with regard to four key language learning con-