Chapter XXIV

Personal Learning Environments for Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the potential of social software and Web 2.0 tools to enhance language learning in a blended learning context. It describes an English as a Foreign Language course that introduces students to several Web 2.0 tools with the aim of helping them develop their own Personal Learning Environment. As students become familiar with the almost endless opportunities for accessing and participating in authentic language on the Web today, they must also learn to find appropriate resources, filter unsuitable materials, manage this information overload, and decide which tools best suit their own learning style. The chapter argues that accompanied with the right pedagogical approach, these tools enhance learning by allowing students to engage in self-directed learning and gain skills and resources that are transferable to their informal, lifelong language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Developments in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) theory and practice are inherently connected to evolutions in technology and societal changes (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). The first phase of CALL in the 1960s and 1970s adopted a structural approach to language learning and was characterized by drill and practice methods. The most advanced technology available at the time was the mainframe computer, which was suited to these methods. By the end of the 1970s, behaviouristic approaches had been rejected in favour of communicative approaches to language learning based on cognitive/constructivist views of learning. These changes were accompanied by the advent of the personal computer, and at the end of the decade multi-media CDs and other software. Learners were encouraged to interact with the computer or to use computer-based tasks as stimuli for learner-learner interaction. The focus was no longer on merely learning...

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form but on learning how to use forms. Though educators felt this was progress, by the end of the 1980s they were calling for more integrative methods for teaching languages that could take into account the many different aspects of the language learning process from form to communication to culture. The advent of the Internet in the 1990s made a shift towards integrative, sociocognitive approaches possible. The Internet allowed educators to implement Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in their classrooms which led to a shift “from learner’s interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer” (Kern & Warschauer, 2000, p. 11). In 1996, Warschauer (1996) claimed that CMC via the Internet was “the single computer application to date with the greatest impact on language teaching” (p. 9). Indeed the technology-centred approaches that characterized both the first two phases of CALL failed to provide the “killer” application for teaching and learning processes that would transform language learning (Cuban, 1986) just as time has proven that computers-as-tutors cannot replace teachers (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1996). On the other hand, the learner-centred approach that characterizes the third phase can “help students and teachers to learn and teach through the aid of technology with a focus on how ICT can be used as an aid to human cognition and consistent with the way the mind works solving complex tasks and dealing with today’s information overflow” (Petrucco, in press).

At the turn of the century, the way the Web was used began to change significantly: rather than a place where information was merely made accessible, it was becoming a space where knowledge was being created. Users, everyday people, began to produce content and global communities of users sharing knowledge or just similar interests began to develop. Millions of software developers around the globe were voluntarily writing the code for open source software programs such as the operating system Linux and the web server Apache, which would rival proprietary software. Universities, such as MIT and Stanford, began to publish course content and lectures on websites open to the public. In other words, a revolution characterized by sharing, openness and co-creation was taking place. In 2003, Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty dubbed this new revolution “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005). Some argue that the term is superfluous and that the Web today is simply an evolution of what it originally was. In a podcast interview, Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the World Wide Web, stated: “If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then that is people to people. But that was what the Web was supposed to be all along” (Laningham, 2006). Regardless of whether or not the term is used, the point is that the way regular users can contribute to the Web has changed. Berners-Lee goes on to explain that for some people Web 2.0 “means moving some of the thinking client side so making it more immediate” and it is just this immediacy and ease with which users can generate content on the Web and participate in online communities that will define what is called Web 2.0 in this chapter.

The use of Web 2.0 in education is still in its infancy, but this chapter will argue that it can transform learning in general and in the language classroom in particular. In his introduction to CALL, Warschauer (1996) states that “the introduction of a new phase does not necessarily entail rejecting the programs and methods of a previous phase; rather the old is subsumed within the new. In addition, the phases do not gain prominence one fell swoop, but, like all innovations, gain acceptance slowly and unevenly” (p. 3). As will be seen in this chapter, the use of Web 2.0 in language learning taps into approaches and methods that characterize the previous phases of CALL, but it also offers new opportunities that were not previously technologically possible.

This chapter reports on an action research study carried out at the University of Padova, Italy. The aim of the project is to explore the potential of Web 2.0 and social software to enhance language