Effective social learning pedagogy in Spanish language teaching: Integrating podcasting and blogging to teach current affairs

Abstract

Podcasting and blogging are used in the Spanish program at the Australian National University (ANU) to give students an immersive language experience. This paper reports on the implementation of a social learning pedagogy developed from a practical learning experience that allowed students to explore current issues in the Spanish-speaking world while improving their aural and writing skills in the Spanish language. We describe the educational design by which blogging and podcasting were integrated into an undergraduate course, analyse the outcomes and show how such Web 2.0 tools can promote a heightened level of engagement in cross-cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity.

1. Introduction

Increasingly, educators are being challenged not only by the demands of complex and multifaceted curricula but also by the imperative to design more effective teaching strategies that embrace the potential of the emerging communication technologies that are pervading all aspects of our everyday lives. Such demands are especially acute in the field of foreign language teaching, where the increasing expectations of digital language teaching methods (and especially the need to examine the role of current digital tools) is apparent (Sykes, Oskoz and Thorne 2008). Given this need for educators to share experiences in technology-enhanced language learning, this contribution describes an innovative attempt to enhance the teaching of Spanish using Web 2.0 tools and hence to illuminate the prospects of heightened learning engagement using a social learning pedagogy design.

Web 2.0 and the rise of social media has emphasised the social dimension of what it means to share and co-construct knowledge in our culture (Bass and Elmendorf 2011). This has impacted on education in general, and on foreign language teaching in particular. Recent research has suggested that the integration of technological innovations into the language learning classroom can open up new channels for collaboration (Mäkitalo-Siegler, Zottmann, Kaplan and Fischer 2010) and serve as a bridge between the learners and the community and culture of the target language. From this perspective, learning is considered as a social activity that is culturally-based (Lantolf and Poehner 2008; Lantolf and Thorne 2006), that is, one
can consider there to be a dialectic relationship between individual learning and the sociocultural context in which learning takes place. This perspective acknowledges the need for timely scaffolding to help overcome the limitations of individual learning by empowering students and enabling them to complete assigned tasks successfully (Benson 2001). This sociocultural approach provides a framework within which Web 2.0 tools can be seen as significant artefacts that can mediate positive learning outcomes in the context of a sound educational design (Thorne and Payne 2005).

In the language teaching context, the revolutionary potential for Web 2.0 (Thorne and Payne 2005) has been largely based on its capacity to take the language learning experience well beyond the confines of the classroom (Jiang 2012). Specifically, research on blogs and podcasts in language learning has shown many benefits to students, including enhancement of students’ level of motivation and engagement; rich and authentic content; meaningful tasks; and the development of diverse language skills (Beckmann and Martin 2013; Cordella and Normand-Marconnet 2012; Florez 2012; Martin and Beckmann 2011, Schrooten 2006; Thorne and Payne 2005, among others). Effectively-designed blogs offer students the opportunity to develop their writing and reading skills through the production and exchange of their work in a public space. Podcasts can enhance the experience of listening to authentic language used within a naturalistic context. Both blogs and podcasts offer students opportunities to become content creators. In this way, Web 2.0 tools can contribute to an active participation and engagement in the co-construction of language learning knowledge (Florez 2012).

With this sociocultural understanding of language learning in mind, we argue that Web 2.0 tools can be effectively framed within a social learning pedagogy, an educational approach that considers knowledge and content as connected to authentic tasks within the learning processes (Bass and Elmendorf 2011). Education design based on such pedagogy requires an alignment of learning outcomes, tasks, assessment and timely scaffolding. The social emphasis is engendered through the integration of a wide range of opportunities for students to represent and co-construct knowledge for an authentic audience, giving them a sense of voice and purpose in their processes of language development. In this context, this contribution offers an account of classroom experience in integrating blogging and podcasting, as Web 2.0 tools, in a thematic Spanish course based on a social learning pedagogy design. We thus demonstrate how Web 2.0 tools can be used to promote a high level of engagement in cross-cultural understanding and cultural sensitivity.

2. Context

This case study describes an intermediate-level Spanish course offered at the Australian National University (ANU). Although blogging and podcasting have been used in several courses in the Spanish program in recent years, the integration of both in the Current Affairs in the Spanish-speaking World (Current Affairs) course has been central to its pedagogical design since 2010. The data reported here derived from the most recent iteration of the course in 2012. Current Affairs is one of the thematic
courses offered to intermediate-level students of Spanish. The thematic courses are designed to give students a cultural understanding of the Spanish-speaking world—delivered solely in Spanish, they complement the more usual language skill-based courses (i.e. Beginners, Continuing, Intermediate and Advanced). *Current Affairs* gives students a sociocultural framework through which to engage with the Spanish-speaking world—students explore a wide range of current issues from Spain and Latin America, analysing their social and historical contexts, through two modules: a polemic topics module (two hours weekly for the 13-week course); and a current affairs module (one hour weekly).

### 3. Podcasting

Podcasting refers to the activity of creating or listening to podcasts, that is, to audio or video files that can be played on portable devices, such as mp3 players or mobile phones and are shared over the internet (Thorne and Payne 2005). Podcasting has been used in the ANU Spanish program since 2007 as a tool to enhance exposure to authentic Spanish language and more recently as a production tool to broadcast students’ own podcasts. In this case study, podcasts were used to create a ‘listening brick’ (Martin and Beckmann 2011), a collection of listening resources provided to students, replacing the traditional ‘reading bricks’ assigned in university courses with multimedia materials. The original idea of the listening brick came from the perceived need for authentic audio learning material of an appropriate level that students could access easily to explore current affairs in the Spanish-speaking world. With this resource, students can listen to selected radio or television programmes on current affairs from Spain and Latin America. The listening brick thus becomes a key source of learning material and particularly helps students develop familiarity with the many diverse Spanish accents in the mass media. Martin and Beckman (2011) have reported in depth on the success of using podcasts and listening bricks in encouraging a simulated immersion in the Spanish language, with demonstrably heightened levels of engagement.

#### 3.1 Implementation of podcasting

Podcasting activities were implemented in the *Current Affairs* polemic topics module (one lecture/one forum session). Students were loaned an Apple iPod nano for the duration of the course. This approach guarantees equity of access to the learning material (Martin and Beckman 2011). Each device came with pre-loaded podcasts selected by the course convener to reflect the topics covered in the course. Each device contained playlists with the podcasts (audio files) for each lecture from week 1 to 7. The podcasts were mostly authentic radio programs (or segments of programs) from Spain and Latin America that addressed issues such as history, politics, international law, gender studies, indigenous studies, globalization and environmental issues. Importantly, these podcasts were authentic material that had not been designed for those learning Spanish, which meant that some of
them were very challenging linguistically for students. To address this issue, the pre-
loaded playlists were organised with a clear order of priorities to facilitate students’
listening, with a wide range of podcasts that covered the topic in different ways,
with different announcers, different durations and different varieties of Spanish.
Careful labeling ensured that students could easily understand the relevance of any
individual podcast to their understanding of the relevant topic.

Each weekly lecture consisted of a presentation of a polemic topic and a related
analysis of its social and historical context. Students were expected to have prepared
for the discussion of the topic through listening to the podcasts that corresponded to
the focus of the lecture. For each lecture/forum topic, students were asked to listen
to at least ninety minutes of podcasts from their device. These podcasts introduced
students both to the relevant historical and/or social issue from multiple perspectives
and also to a specific vocabulary on the selected topic. For the first half of the course,
the students participated in a forum session immediately after the lecture. In the
second half of the course, students prepared group oral presentations on one of the
topics, focussing on a different theme to that presented in the lecture and using the
podcasts as their main research resource. This presentation and two essays, written
under test conditions, comprised the assessment for the polemic module, with
extensive engagement with the podcast material being the key to success. Listening
to the podcasts offered a stimulating language experience, allowing students to hear
and understand different geographical varieties of Spanish. This outcome would have
been very hard to achieve using more conventional teaching approaches.

4. Blogging

A blog is a type of website that enables users to post regular entries (‘blog posts’),
which may include news, short essays, comments, photos or videos. Most blogs are
interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments: it is this interactivity that makes
them particularly attractive in teaching and learning languages (Thorne and Payne
2005). As a highly interactive and public tool, the blog allows students to not only
engage with the content but with the community that exists both inside and outside
the classroom. In this ANU case study, blogging was used as a tool to engage students
with topics from the Spanish-speaking world by requiring them to research and write
posts on a class blog.

4.1 Implementation of interactive blogging

The course’s current affairs module aimed to immerse students in ‘hot topics’ in the
Spanish-speaking world through reading, writing and debating a topic of personal
interest through interactive blogging. The latter sought to facilitate students’
learning such that they could understand current Spanish news; summarise news in
Spanish; write an analytical commentary about a controversial topic; debate current
affairs related to Spain or Latin America; and develop a cultural understanding of the
Spanish-speaking world.
To achieve these goals, diverse tasks were designed to engage students in blogging activities. For example, students were asked to research a recent news topic from the Spanish-speaking world that was relevant to a personal area of interest. They were asked to summarise that news and post an analytical commentary (including external sources, such as hyperlinks and videos) on the class blog. Students also developed an oral presentation that allowed them to debate issues emerging in the same topic posted on the blog. At the same time, they were encouraged to comment on blogs posted by other students and respond to comments on their own blog posting.

The first tutorial sessions were devoted to ensuring that students understood the practical demands of effective blogging: expectations of the blogging task were explained and described in detail and scaffolding regarding technological and language-oriented skills were provided. It is important to note that the tutor became a facilitator and mediated students’ learning through instructional support. The tutor created the class blog and invited each student through an email to join the blog as an author, which ensured that students could write their own entries and make comments on their classmates’ entries but could not edit other people’s entries. The free blogging platform Wordpress was used, as it is user-friendly and flexible. Students followed instructions to create an account on Wordpress and were instructed how to post and how to comment on the class blog.

Students completed different tasks before the face-to-face session, both in class and after class. Before the face-to-face session, students undertook research, read, summarised their chosen news item(s) and posted their entry or wrote comments on the class blog. In class, they either presented the topic orally or participated in the class discussion. After the class, they commented on the other students’ posts. Blogging became both an individual and collective task, as each student became the ‘blogger of the week’, and all were encouraged to become active commentators of their classmates’ blog entries.

During the tutorial sessions, technological issues were addressed alongside linguistic aspects and research skills. Students were shown different databases for news and scholarly articles and demonstrations of search strategies were provided. As topics could not be repeated by different students, a wide range of social issues (most prominently politics, arts, health, natural disasters, and indigenous issues) related to different places in the Spanish-speaking world were brought to the attention of students by their peers.

The class blog was intended to be useful not only as a repository of students’ writings but also as a tool that fostered interaction, learner autonomy and collaboration. Students worked on their own in the preparation phase but the blog post was published on a semi-public space and commented on by an audience. The blog thus became a safe environment in which the students could engage in discussion of current affairs from the Spanish-speaking world. The blog was visible to the general public but only the members of the class were able to post and comment. Students showed a high level of engagement and participation as they commented...
on other students’ posts throughout the semester, as evidenced by the high number of comments and posts (higher than that required by the course requirements).

In the 2012 course, further innovation was made with the introduction of students’ responses to comments as another way of enhancing students’ engagement and interaction among themselves. Students were requested to write a new entry responding to the comments on their blog entry and class presentation topic made by other students and the teacher at the end of the semester. This encouraged students to research and reflect even further on their topic, triggered by their classmates’ comments.

Students were assessed by the completion of the blog tasks. This means that students were assessed for their posts, comments to other entries, oral presentation and response entries. The assessment criteria were based on the completion of the task assigned and the development/demonstration of critical thinking skills and cross-cultural understanding, rather than the evidence of grammatical accuracy. These assessment tasks were designed with the idea of fostering intercultural communicative competence. This experience has shown how blogging can contribute to advancing students’ “capacity to contingently and dynamically interact with members of other speech communities and cultures” (Sykes et al. 2008: 533).

5. Integration of podcasting and blogging = social learning pedagogy

The integration of blogging and podcasting in the Current Affairs course proved to be a broadly successful and innovative means of promoting a heightened level of cross-cultural engagement. However, it also proved an effective example of how social learning pedagogy can be implemented through the use of Web 2.0 tools, demonstrating that the latter have the clear potential to engender in students the ability to be content-creators and participants in an authentic community. This is especially relevant when learning a foreign language: learners are acquiring not only an additional language but an understanding of one or more other cultures. The incorporation of podcasting and blogging in Current Affairs allowed us to articulate and align the learning outcomes with meaningful tasks and a coherent assessment scheme, aimed at the development of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in Spanish at a higher intermediate level. The learning activities and assessment tasks were designed to enable students to summarise relevant information from extended sequences of spoken Spanish (including radio programs, radio documentaries and lectures); analyse news as cultural and historical texts; and present and discuss analysis of current affairs topics in oral and written form.

Another advantage of the integration of blogging and podcasting in the Current Affairs was the wide range of topics covered, which helped to challenge stereotypes and assumptions about the target cultures (Starkey and Osler 2001). Certainly, students were exposed to news items confirming the typical stereotypes associated with Spanish-speaking cultures (such as high levels of corruption and
violence) but they also became much more aware that even societies that may be
classified as ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘conservative’ may have already have ‘human rights
achievements’ (e.g. homosexual marriage laws, limits on the percentage of profit of
mining companies, paid maternity leave) not yet legalised in Australia.

5.1 Implementation of social learning pedagogy

In implementing a social learning pedagogy, we developed an educational design
that approached the model proposed by Bass and Elmendorf (2011): to “engage
students with what we might call an ‘authentic audience’ (other than the teacher),
where the representation of knowledge for an audience is absolutely central to the
construction of knowledge in a course”. By engaging students in challenging tasks,
we were helping students to construct their knowledge as part of an authentic
community. As described above, the implementation of a social learning pedagogy in
Current Affairs is evidenced throughout the articulation and alignment of the
learning outcomes with meaningful tasks and a coherent assessment scheme.

5.2 Students’ responses to the social learning pedagogy design

To better understand the effectiveness of the social learning pedagogy adopted in
the course, we conducted group discussions with students about their experience
of learning Spanish using podcasts and blogs, to provide empirical data on the
effectiveness of this social learning approach. These discussions occurred at the
middle and end of the semester as part of the tutorial sessions. In addition, at the
end of the semester we also surveyed students (with a 50% response rate).

Most students reported that the blogging and podcasting had had a positive
effect on their intercultural communicative competence. The majority of students’
responses can be typified by the following comment (bold denotes our emphasis):

The use of blogs was a really fantastic and innovative way to learn language
and really helped me to see how useful language is for communication in the
modern world. As a student, I really appreciate how the Spanish Department
is committed to using modern technology (such as blogs and iPods) to make
learning interactive and prepare us for using a language in real world situations.
(Student #5)

One key element in the implementation of the social learning pedagogy approach
was scaffolding, in the form of examples of tasks (blog entries) and with tools and
instructional support such as the provision of an iPod, training in database use and
a list of useful radio programs and mass media from the Spanish-speaking world.
Although the course was not directly language-oriented, scaffolding to promote
Spanish language skills was also provided, for example in terms of tips on writing a
summary, skimming and scanning a text and oral presentation structure. Formative
feedback on their work was given to students throughout the course and both lecturer
and tutor provided individual and collective comments throughout. A typical student response from the survey reflected the appreciation for this form of scaffolding:

Everyone felt included in the conversation, even if they did not have a lot of confidence when speaking. The tutor also encouraged active involvement in the course through providing stimulating comments on the blogs, encouraging us to think deeply about the topics. (Student #14)

The different components of Current Affairs valued students’ learning styles and recognised the different tasks and artefacts that mediate learning, which is another key feature of social learning pedagogy design (Levy 2007). Thus, the course offered a wide range of opportunities for students to collaborate, reflect on their learning and integrate their knowledge in various ways. Students were encouraged to develop and deepen their critical thinking skills through their active participation, interacting with a wide range of sources in collaboration with the class community. In both modules of the course (the polemic and the current affairs), students demonstrated high levels of engagement and participation in the different tasks during the semester. In the polemic topics module, students used podcasting as part of the process of understanding the social and historical contexts of the topics covered in the lectures. The forum sessions were student-driven as they analysed a topic in depth, developing questions in groups. In the polemic topics lectures and the forum, students were shown how to analyse a topic, which they then did for themselves in the current affairs module. Students created the content of each module by participating in the blogging tasks. This approach allowed students to gain a sense of voice and purpose in meaningful tasks, as this typical survey response indicates:

The course was heavily based on the cultural context of Latin America, and most of the learning focused on simultaneously building up our Spanish skills and our critical understanding of the dynamic culture and history of Latin America. (Student #3)

The course assessment identified intermediate- and end-goal assessment tasks. This design allowed us to capture how the process of learning was taking place throughout the semester in different ways, from non-traditional assessment tasks (blog posts) to more traditional ones (essay tests). It also allowed students to demonstrate their understanding of different topics at different levels and their development of different skills (critical thinking, listening, reading, writing and speaking) in the target language. The assessment tasks also allowed students to increasingly reflect on their own learning and give and receive feedback from the class community (oral presentations, blog comments). One of the main strengths that students commented on in the evaluative group discussions was in relation to the assessment tasks. Although most of them acknowledged that the course was challenging, they also valued the variety of the assessment tasks and their distribution throughout the semester:
I never thought I could write so much in Spanish and about so many complicated issues. It was challenging, but so much fun! (Student #17)

A minority of students did express frustration with the pedagogical design of the course, based on their view that the completion of tasks and the authentic language of the audio-visual material were sometimes too difficult for them, especially at the beginning of the course. Another common frustration among this group was the high demands for active participation and engagement in the course, not only in terms of task completion, but also in terms of content creation. Although most of them saw this as positive, a few students perceived this as not necessarily helping their learning. As Martin and Beckmann (2011) suggest, this perception could to some extent be explained by resistance to innovative change, even though we had envisaged likely difficulties and systematically included timely scaffolding and a wide range of tasks and tools throughout the course to mitigate these obstacles. Certainly, as lecturer and tutor, we can say that the nature of a social pedagogy also challenged us as we shared the demand for co-construction of understanding and engagement of content and required us to explore and study topics beyond our expertise and comfort zone.

6. Conclusion

The integration of podcasting and blogging in the Current Affairs course constituted a deliberate attempt to put a social pedagogy in place, in order to reflect our understanding of the nature of learning as a socially-mediated activity (Lantolf and Poehner 2008). The course design enabled us to connect authentic material with complex tasks in order to maximise the learning of the Spanish language through an immersion into the current affairs of the Spanish-speaking world. The evaluative evidence, during and at the end of the course, suggest that the learning design was broadly effective in engaging students and assisting them to integrate their language skills with a broader context and community.

This case study has thus allowed us to demonstrate the potential of podcasting and blogging as tools that can contribute to a positive language learning experience. Clearly blogs and podcasts do not have an intrinsic value on their own but provide a potentiality to be exploited in a sound educational design for foreign language learning (Sykes et al. 2008). The design implemented in Current Affairs was coherent with a social pedagogy, employing an explicit sociocultural understanding of language learning, as reflected on the alignment of learning outcomes, tasks, assessment, scaffolding and the use of Web 2.0 tools. The dialectic relationship between the individual learner and the sociocultural context was engendered through the constant challenge of co-constructing content and active participation in the tasks. This design proved able to promote high level of students’ engagement and to empower students to understand sociocultural contexts in the Spanish-speaking world, a finding in line with Sykes et al.’s (2008) advocacy for the powerful potential of Web 2.0.
The *Current Affairs* experience also demonstrates that podcasting and blogging can effectively contribute to the development of productive and receptive skills of Spanish learning. The design of complex tasks challenged students and thus engaged them in their own learning. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that frustration and disengagement can also be outcomes of the introduction of technological innovations without effectively setting expectations and creating scaffolded support for students less familiar with this innovative form of learning engagement. However, if task completion is aided by expectation setting and timely scaffolding, the learning experience can be positive and productive, with participants developing a collaborative attitude to overcome difficulties and align their individual needs to the collective sociocultural context. This suggests that a course design like the one presented here requires engagement, flexibility and commitment throughout the course.

While, as Thorne and Smith (2011) argue, the question of using or not using technologies may be largely irrelevant nowadays—we must—a focus on how we utilise technology in foreign language teaching is an imperative. The design illustrated here is our response to the need for pedagogy-driven approaches to the use of Web 2.0 tools, with many benefits for learners likely to accrue from the exploration of these tools as serious, relevant spheres for the creation and shaping of knowledge in meaningful, real-world context.

**Notes**

1. An Apple iPod nano is a mobile digital device; iPod and nano are trademarks of Apple Inc., registered in the US and other countries.

**References**


Appendix: Class blogs

2010 Group 1 http://12span3100.wordpress.com/2010/10/13/los-cartoneros/
2010 Group 2 http://2span3100.wordpress.com/2010/09/16/ezln-ejercito-zapatista-de-liberacion-nacional/