Language interface with technology, Web2.0-wikiloquial

Abstract

Newer interactive and emerging technologies, Web 2.0, for instance, foster the development of learning communities. The way that individuals perceive and use the Internet provides opportunities to engage foreign language students in the development of sustainable repositories. In view of the fact that wikis are most useful as a repository for collaboratively learning, Wikiloquial emerges as a Web-based collaboration in writing that explores the impact of wikis as an online space to support and document the understanding of colloquial expressions.
1. Introduction

The rapid pace of technological development has become a challenge for educators across disciplines. This accelerated rate of change exceeds their ability to embed it into curriculum design and the assessment process. Rüschoff and Ritter (2001: 220) point out the need for “a radical change in our approaches to teaching and learning in order to best prepare future generations for living and working in tomorrow’s world”. Thus, for foreign language learners, the provision of online access bridges the real life based on the principles of the Task Based Language Learning and Teaching approach, TBLT, (Schrooten 2006; Oxford 2006; Nunan 2004; Ellis 2003) and classroom learning spaces; “in opening up new channels for collaboration, technology is also stretching the limits of physical space” (Mäkitalo-Siegl et al. 2010: 3). Hence, compliance with curriculum online and research expectations should be integral to curriculum texts and assignments through task authenticity and long-term use (Pica 2005: 340).

Advanced technology allows students to communicate and collaborate by using applications they already know or introducing them to new ones, providing easy steps to follow. Web 2.0 offers, for instance, a range of tools to encompass students’ participation beyond their classroom walls. Web 2.0 tools, such as Wikis, facilitate the collaborative development of students’ performance when they are motivated by real reasons to use the target language. Recent research shows that a range of social technologies and tools that enable users to create, publish and share digital content are increasingly being used to support teaching and learning (Lee Yong Tay et al. 2011; Judd et al. 2010; Zorko 2009; Son 2007). Therefore, the focus of this project is to examine the impact and effectiveness of Wikis as a vehicle to engage students in building up resources as repositories, develop critical thinking, promote collaborative creative writing, and interact with native speakers.

On the basis of informal discussions amongst Spanish colleagues and students, it seems that we concentrate on what a learner should acquire and how it will be delivered but not on why a learner studies a second, third or fourth language. Why does a student pursue a language course? Are their aims achieved or will they be fulfilled? The exploration of learners’ needs is often avoided or taken for granted. Different language curricula and courses should be developed for groups with different needs profiles, in particular at tertiary level. One way that language learners’ individual needs and development of their abilities could be fulfilled is by using information and communication technology applications such as wikis. These tools allow a high degree of differentiation, foster learners’ motivation and involvement, and emphasize the teacher’s role as a supporter and a guide rather than a provider of content (CALL/TELL approach).
2. Language interface with technology

2.1 Literature review

The Communicative approach in language teaching emphasizes the pedagogical principle best known as ‘learn by doing’. Under its umbrella, TBLT (Nunan 2004, 1997; Ellis 2003; Salaberry 2001; Skehan 1998; Willis 1996; Prabhu 1987) and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) paradigms allow their theoretical frameworks to be put into perspective by the use of multimedia and Web 2.0 tools. Multimedia and Web 2.0 tools comply with learning theory and pedagogical approaches with new interactive and emerging technologies in the way that individuals perceive and use the internet. The use of new technologies in the language learning process leads “to an act in which a learner plays the role of an active constructor of knowledge” (Rüschhoff and Ritter 2001: 221).

Biggs’ Constructive Alignment approach (1999) facilitates task design for assessment according to desired learning outcomes. Thus, the interplay between teachers and researchers will make technology-enhanced language learning research more inventive and creative and provide more effective ways to enhance language learning with technology (Egbert et al. 2009: 766).

Accordingly, CALL (Lirola and Cuevas 2008; Debski 2003; Coleman 2005; Levy 1999, 2000; Warschauer and Cook 1999; Warschauer 2000; Chapelle 1998; Warschauer 1996, amongst others) and TELL (Egbert 2007) convey applicable principles in syllabus design (Ellis 2006; Pica 2005; Nunan 1989; Long 1985) in order to develop students’ communicative competence. Over the years, researchers have moved beyond implementing different approaches such as grouping students, posing questions, and adjusting inputs and outputs. Nunan (1989) highlights the significance of task components, goals, input, activities, the teacher’s role, the learner’s role and setting, whilst Ellis (2006) points out the importance of the sequential phases of a task-based lesson (pre-task, during task and post-task).

Interaction via Web 2.0 tools, essentially wikis, is sustainable and engaging in any learning space online, as many task types involve multiple skills and sub-abilities, such as reading a passage for comprehension and then doing something with the information that has been read. For instance, this could include answering questions, discussing the information, making a decision, solving a problem, and expressing how one feels about a given situation (Oxford 2006). Those considerations suggest a need to stress that research must be tied into curriculum and to classroom practice. For instance, out of twelve research studies that have been carried out on evaluating writing in technology-enhanced environments, during the period 2000-2008, only a few studies were conducted by teacher/researchers. Some experts have conducted studies using CALL and TELL approaches on feedback. While Chiu and Savignon (2006) looked at the effect of content versus form feedback given via email on student draft writing, Shang (2007) provided insights on peer feedback via email and Byrne
(2007), on tutors’ feedback. Shang had students provide peer feedback via email and looked at syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy, and lexical density. In this study a drafting process is integrated and feedback is provided by the instructor. A correction code, which is embedded as a hyperlink on the wiki, is used to look not only at syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy, and lexical density, but also at the inference of social-cultural context and the interpretation of colloquial expressions. Subsequently, students are required to correct the highlighted errors on their own. The drafting process provides incentive to participants to be inquisitive about their own mistakes and encourages them to look for further explanations.

The benefit of integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into education is invaluable. Most students have access to computers at home, and in the classroom, they have become part of their natural environment (Hennessy et al. 2003, 2005; Dawes 2001; and Williams et al. 2000). As an example, a key element in the European Commission’s strategy is to ensure the effectiveness of European education systems and the competitiveness of the European economy, which relies on the use of ICT in education. Since 2007, ICT for education has also become a general priority in the four vertical programs of Erasmus, Comenius, Leonard da Vinci and Grundtvig (Eurydice Network 2011). Concurrently, the potential of ICT for language learning is increasingly making good progress. That potential has been summarized by Schrooten (2006: 129) as follows:

1. Working with ICT elicits a high degree of learner motivation and involvement.
2. ICT allows a high degree of differentiation. Individual needs and abilities can easily be accommodated.
3. ICT offers enriched content and allows a more intense, multisensory learning process.
4. ICT makes teaching more efficient, as the teacher can focus more on supporting learners rather than on providing content.

2.2 Context

2.2.1 Rationale

Constructive alignment (Biggs 1999, 1996) reinforces the notion and understanding of how goals, learning outcomes and assessment should fit into a logical sequence in order to organize content and therefore teaching learning activities. All student learning activities involve cognitive processes such as creating, problem solving, decision-making and assessment. The development of collaborative projects that reach real audiences other than students’ classmates, leads to exploring different dimensions. Thus, Language interface with technology as a project results in a reconsideration of the importance of addressing students’ contemporary needs.
The fact that more sophisticated technology centres and computer language labs may be assembled to keep up with the advanced technology, may provoke attitudes of reluctance or approval amongst language teachers. However, language teachers’ drive to maximise learning outcomes will encourage them to exploit the full potential of technology that allows students to communicate and collaborate by using applications they already know. The existing technology tools available on the net, which can be embedded in teaching practice, lead language teachers to be critical of their own approach. When technology is used, many lecturers reproduce, if not copy, the content from the prescribed text to a power point presentation.

The extraordinary development of the use of new technology such as multimedia and Web 2.0 tools in education, has a strong potential to further create and develop new theoretical models to comply with students digital needs, regardless of the subject or course that they take. Web 2.0 tools allow searching, selecting and filtering, as well as structuring and presenting knowledge. These aspects comply with the principles of relate, create and donate (Shneiderman 1992) articulated in the Engagement theory (Kearsley and Shneiderman 1999). The Engagement theory occurs in a group context (i.e. collaborative teams), thus relate, it is project-based, thus create, and it has an outside (authentic) focus, thus donate. Developments in Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) practice and research in the uses of technology are increasing (see Project RE 2010, The Speak up Survey, which is conducted annually by Project Tomorrow, iNACOL’s report and Horizon Report). Therefore, technology is no longer confined to obtaining information but also allows the creation of sites in which new approaches and knowledge can be shared. It has been found (Bosco and Krueger 2011; Moyle 2010; Greenhow et al. 2009; Moyle and Owen 2009) that web 2.0 tools such as Wikis encourage educators in the use of the latest technology platforms to develop collaborative skills and creating social networks amongst students.

Language interface with technology, Web2.0-wikiloquial project (currently in progress) may contribute as to where a plethora of available web applications can be embedded as functional equivalents of modules in a foreign language-learning environment.

2.2.2 Project design

Language interface with technology combines observation, surveys and open questions to gain deeper perspectives and to understand ambiguities. Language interface with technology encompasses two parts, which are different but complementary. One part leads to a description of the pilot study, observations and feedback from participants and the other asks for students’ and teachers’ perceptions, whether there is resistance or reluctance towards the use of Wikis in a language course curriculum design and assessment. This paper focuses on the first part. The data is drawn from the group of students who participate in the development of a website wikiloquial as a pilot study.
2.2.3 Pilot study

In response to the ANU commitment to achieve flexibility in learning and teaching, and to comply with student needs to obtain flexible access to learning resources, this pilot study focuses on building up a wiki, Wikiloquial, to be used as a teaching-learning learning tool. *Wikiloquial* specializes in collecting and compiling colloquial expressions from Hispanic films (from twenty one Spanish speaking countries) by current students for their peers and future students. The idea is that students collaborate in constructing this wiki, which in turn is edited by invited native speakers from different Spanish speaking countries. This wiki has the potential to become an on-line dictionary.

*Wikiloquial* is designed to foster a deep understanding of colloquial expressions and their socio-cultural context, since our students are exposed to global communication and the opportunity to travel to places where Spanish is spoken. *Wikiloquial* also encourages cross-interaction skills, values and attributes that promote appreciation, acknowledgment, open-mindedness and respect for diversity within a language. It is worth noting that standard Spanish is spoken across the Hispanic world, regardless of whether it is in Latin America or Spain, as it is regulated by the Real Academy of the Spanish Language.

2.2.3 Aims

1. Capture students’ interest in seeking language learning to communicate in real situations via technology outside the parameters of the classroom.
2. Provide clarity and focus to advanced students by understanding Spanish varieties through multimedia (IT, *Wikiloquial*, and films).
3. Expand cultural knowledge and awareness of Hispanic colloquialisms, with a focus on immersion with native speakers.
4. Strengthen cross-institutional links nationally and internationally.
5. Provide a potential benchmarking tool.

2.2.4 Participants

Participants are undergraduate students at ANU who have enrolled at an advanced Spanish level as part of their Spanish culture studies. Some of them were doing their second and fourth consecutive year of Spanish at the time of the study, while others have spent some time being exposed to language immersion in a Hispanic country, either studying or travelling. Their ages range from 19 to 25 years. These participants contribute to building up a wiki, *Wikiloquial*, as a repository on colloquialisms from movies.
2.2.5 Methodology

In the film module, as part of an Advanced Spanish language and culture course, students are required to watch the film and visit websites to get a general idea of the socio-cultural context of the film which is expanded by guest speakers. Subsequently, students receive a list of colloquial expressions extracted from the film and are required to explain, in written form, their own interpretation by using Wikiloquial, which is accessible from any computer, at anytime, anywhere.

In order to comprehend the meaning of those colloquial expressions from content or linguistic clues, students need to watch the scenes where these expressions appear, while focusing on visual images, sound, camera effects, body expressions, music and background. As soon as the students contribute to the wiki, volunteer native speaking contributors make comments on students’ input to clarify concepts and correct or corroborate the right meaning. Such an interaction promotes original thinking and brings with it life-long communication skills, skills of criticism and analysis, which are of practical use in oral presentations, and which could be further explored as an assessment item or whole class discussions.

3. Results

3.1 Observations

Results are based on researcher observations and participants’ perceptions concerning the best and the worst of Wikiloquial. Our observations corroborate the main use of the behaviourist approach — as applied to the software — that is currently available for languages. It could be argued that repeated exposure to the same material is beneficial for learning, that the computer is ideal for carrying out repeated drills and presenting such material on an individual basis (Warschauer 1996). However, the main problem is that this software focuses mainly on the linguistic complexity of the content, rather than language-based social interaction, while web 2.0 tools and their applicability in foreign language learning allows for the development of projects such as Wikiloquial. Wikiloquial constantly evolves, allowing students to perform more as readers, writers and language users. Wikiloquial facilitates the interaction between them, as they build and share new knowledge to understand the cultural diversity of the target language. Observations were annotated during the course of the pilot study, and these observations are consistent with the the previous literature.

1. Using students’ digital capabilities acts as a bridge to their everyday experiences to new classroom experiences.

2. Students are encouraged to make connections to each other or to a virtual community. The results show an increased virtual or in presence interaction, as the students collaborated to actively create their own digital learning space.
3. Connectivity of the wiki allows students to write, draft, edit and submit assignments online from any computer, anywhere and their own time.

4. It was a classic example of a task-based language-learning activity.

5. The online nature of feedback allows student writing to be turned into language-learning material. A link is posted so that students can easily access the homepage of the correction code. The process of drafting and making corrections helps them to improve their writing skills.

6. The collective discussion page allows students to share and exchange opinions on issues that are relevant to them.

7. Online film reviews can reach a wider audience than printed hard copies, and can highlight the main features of a particular film, raising awareness of political issues, as well as pointing out particular historic moments, and implicit social cultural events or issues.

### 3.2 Students’ perceptions

Wikis facilitate the collaborative development of students’ performance when they are motivated by real reasons to use the target language, much like their contributions on *Wikiloquial*. The data, drawn from responses to the two open questions used to promote reflection on the best and the worst of *Wikiloquial*, appear to be useful not only as a source of information in making decisions but in the assessment of practices that can improve the repository.

Responses suggest a strong positive espousal of purpose and capacity in students’ perceptions of their engagement with wikis. These include their understanding of the importance of interaction in the online learning environment and as part of the assessment of the course.

**Student 1:** It was really fun do the wiki; I really enjoyed studying my film and interacting with the other students. It’s a fantastic learning tool!

**Student 2:** Being able to communicate with other students and see their interpretation of the films studied.

**Student 3:** the general idea- generating discussion about the usage of colloquial terms is invaluable to non-native speakers. It’s the best boundary to understanding and speaking a language.

**Student 4:** Submission of assessment [is] really easy, great to be able to access new expressions and see how others were dealing with the project.

**Student 5:** A good place to have information/ resources about all the films.

**Student 6:** Being able to contribute and complete the assessment in my own time. Saved [time] having to come in just to hand it in. It was interesting using this medium to do our assessment.
Student 7: Being able to submit things online and see what everyone was doing and everyone else’s colloquial expressions.

Student 8: Ability to access from home. Ability to keep adding/changing contributions. Ability to study more about ‘real’ usable Spanish.

Student 9: Understanding colloquial expressions better which helped improve my understanding off the movie I studied.

4. Conclusion

It is relevant to underline that the capacity of students to achieve effective collaboration is dependent on the nature of the task, as much as on their efforts (Ellis, 2005: 25). Therefore, it is relevant to demonstrate that by constructing and developing tasks that are contextualized through the use of technology (Wikis) to an authentic or real audience, and are learner centred, a pathway is made to build up useful repositories for next generations to come. These subsequent generations will use these repositories actively as they continue building up the website.

These repositories, such as Wikiloquial, may constitute valuable data for further research on intercultural diversity amongst Spanish speaking countries and explain how colloquial expressions last or change over a period of time. It is clear that task-based language teaching and Wikis potentially offer great richness if explored further. At the same time, to find answers that will enhance the teaching and learning of languages around the world from different perspectives, hoping that students’ needs will be more fully met in this global era, as Abel points out that:

researchers can be advised to consider how their breakthrough ideas can cross over into the mainstream by making life easier on teachers and students fits and then subtly contributing to behaviour change over time (2010: 213).

5. Constraints and implications

The first discovery made, when the wiki project was implemented, was that a class wiki created in one semester couldn’t generate or replicate the kind of online communities in which students might already participate. However, a built up wiki repository could result in a bigger and more sustainable resource. It could also be a meeting point for foreign language learners.

Whilst it was natural to participate in the wiki environment, some students found the technological aspect a burden, provoking a lack of enthusiasm as it represented additional training and processing technology management. Reluctance was obvious. Thus, it was imperative to gauge reactions through the survey and questionnaire, which will be the next step to substantiate and validate the above observations.
References


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