Wenying JIANG
The University of Queensland

Use of a web-diary as a CALL task in teaching Chinese as a foreign language

Abstract

This study focuses on the use of a web-diary as a CALL task in the Chinese as a foreign language classroom. It has investigated how well this task was received in general by students, whether it was perceived as an effective way of improving their language skills and what type of scaffolding measures were required to make the use of the web-diary successful in a foreign language classroom. The data show that the majority of participants perceived the use of the web-diary task as being very useful or useful in improving their language skills and recommended using a web-diary for the following year’s class. Moreover, most participants saw some advantages of using self-chosen topics in writing the web-diary entries. In terms of the minimum length requirement for each entry, most students responded that the minimum length requirement was necessary. They also responded that feedback was necessary in making the task successful. Scaffolding measures such as training in the first teaching week, a supported method of credit giving and not penalizing minor errors were crucial for the task to be successfully implemented. In sum, this study presents an instruction model for maximizing the potential in using the web-diary CALL task to improve students’ writing skills.
1. Introduction

In recent years, two major changes have taken place in the second language classroom. One is a change from the teacher-centred, class-lecture based, and structural-syllabus instruction to a more student-centred, hands-on, practical, and task-based teaching approach (Shank and Cleary 1994; Ellis 2003). The other change is a technological revolution realized in the increasing use of computers for learning, the implementation of the Internet, and the rise of network-based teaching (González-Lloret 2003). One of the benefits of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been the extension of the language learning experience beyond the confines of the classroom. Increased flexibility, reduced negative affect (compared to face-to-face interaction), and the ability to cater to differing learning styles have seen the incorporation of CALL into the language learning curriculum as generally well-received by learners (Jiang and Ramsay 2005).

Web-diaries have been used to enhance students’ writing skills as a form of alternative assessment in writing classrooms, not only for native speakers (Barrios 2003), but also for second language learners (Campbell 2003; Pinkman 2005). However, few of such implementations in the classroom have examined students’ perceptions and none have offered scaffolding measures to help make the use of such tasks more effective. As Bush (2008: 3) states, “Another concern is the simplistic approach to blindly interjecting new technology into the classroom without thoughtfully matching student learning problems with appropriate technology use.”

As computers and various educational technologies become more and more popular in tertiary education context worldwide, language educators are becoming increasingly interested in adopting technology for language education. This echoes calls for more research “to move toward explaining how computers can be used to support second language learning (i.e. the kinds of tasks or activities that should be used and in what kinds of settings)” (Liu et al. 2003: 264). This study makes an effort to explore how well a CALL task, namely the web-diary, is received by learners, and what type of scaffolding measures were required to make the use of the web-diary successful in a foreign language classroom.

2. The web-diary as a CALL task in the CFL classroom

2.1 The design of the web-diary CALL task

The web-diary CALL task in this study was designed under the guidance of Chapelle’s (1998:23) “Seven Hypotheses Relevant for Developing Multimedia CALL”, for third year students of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Alberta in Canada. The web-diary task emphasizes the importance of enabling the production of target language output by engaging the learners in target language use (hypothesis 3), noticing and correction of errors (hypotheses 4
and 5) and the negotiation of meaning to accomplish a task (hypotheses 6 and 7). It enabled students to write on a topic which interested them or which they simply enjoyed writing about.

The goals of this web-diary task for students include: (1) to learn the skills of Chinese word processing on computers; (2) to practise the use of pinyin; (3) to practise character recognition by character selection; (4) to learn to express themselves by using the vocabulary and sentence structures learnt; (5) to stretch their language skills through being motivated to tell a story of their own; and (6) to learn to write by engaging in an enjoyable task on a self-chosen topic.

This CALL task is very different from a writing assignment with on-line submission. Firstly, a web-diary involves students writing about their own personal life (whether real or imaginary), while an assignment with on-line submission usually involves a common topic being assigned to them. Secondly, the web-dairy task enables students to read and comment on each other’s writing, while a writing assignment is usually submitted to the teacher. Thirdly, students can correct or re-write their diary entries after posting on WebCT each week, while they usually cannot change anything after submitting a writing assignment to their teacher. Finally, the teacher’s feedback to each student is open to the whole class in the case of the web-diary, while in the case of a writing assignment students usually only have access to their own feedback.

2.2 The implementation of the web-diary CALL task

As Zhao (2005:8) states, “The effectiveness of technology is largely mediated by how teachers use it. Thus understanding how teachers use technology in the language classroom is of great importance”. The CALL web-diary task in this study may hold great educational potential, but until it is used properly, it may not have any positive impact on learning. Thus, assessing the effectiveness of the task with technology is in reality assessing the effectiveness of its uses rather than the task itself. Applying second language research to CALL, Chapelle (1997) suggests two critical questions for CALL research: (1) What kind of language does the learner engage in during a CALL activity?; (2) How good is the language experience in CALL for L2 learning? This study explores the second question. Specifically, it explores how positive the language experience is in writing a web-diary in Chinese as a second language.

In the autumn semester of 2008, a web-diary task was incorporated as part of the curriculum for a third year Chinese course (CHINA301), taught by the author at the Department of East Asian Studies in the University of Alberta, Canada. The requirements for the weekly web-diary task were specified in the course profile. Every week (weeks 2-13; the first week was reserved for training) a web-diary entry was required from each of the students who enrolled in CHINA301 to be posted on the discussion board of the course’s website on WebCT, an on-line platform used by the University of Alberta. The diary entry could record a current real event in a student’s life, or an imaginary event (e.g. a world trip or a trip around China; life as a movie or sports star, or as a political prisoner). There were three main requirements to be
fulfilled for the web-diary entries: (1) all 12 entries must be under the one self-chosen theme, in order to maintain some coherence or continuity between weekly entries. For example, if a student writes about his or her trips overseas, each entry must describe a trip to a different country; if a student chooses the theme “My favourite movies”, each entry should describe a different movie. (2) Each entry should be of a certain length, with a minimum of 120 Chinese characters. (3) Each entry must be posted by 5pm each Friday (weeks 2-13). Missing or late entries from these weeks would incur a 2% credit deduction. In order to motivate students to practice more writing in Chinese, no penalties were given for minor errors, although major errors were discussed in the following week’s class. Students were also encouraged to read their classmates’ weekly entries. Students were trained in Chinese word-processing in the first week’s class in the Arts Resource Center (ARC). Self-access times in the ARC were available each week.

The web-diary task accounted for 20% of the final grade for the course. Apart from the web-diary task, learners had three hours of teaching every week for this course. The assessment included four components: in-class quizzes 20% (weekly); web-diary entries 20% (weekly); mid-semester exam 25% (week 7); and final exam 35% (exam period).

The WebCT discussion board maintained a permanent, accessible record, which could be used to evaluate a learner’s progress throughout the semester. Scaffolding measures included: training in the first teaching week; credit being granted to students in the second week if they tried the task regardless of quality and success at posting; credit being granted to students from the third week onwards only where posting was successful; minor writing errors not being penalized (although major errors were discussed in the following week class); and the provision of encouraging feedback to each student by the instructor.

3. The study

3.1 Participants

The twenty eight students who enrolled in CHINA301 all participated in the study. Among the 28 students, 11 were male while 17 were female. Their average age was 26. The learner cohort for this course was diverse, reflecting the contemporary Canadian tertiary community demographic: a broad range of ethnicity, English language competency, computer literacy, ages and gender was represented.

3.2 Procedure

At the end of semester, after the completion of the web-diary task, a questionnaire was distributed to all students (see Appendix). The 10 questions were designed to investigate how well this task was received in general by students; whether it was
perceived as an effective way of improving their language skills; and what type of scaffolding measures were considered useful to make the use of a web-diary successful in the CFL classroom. Although it was emphasized that returning the questionnaire was entirely optional, all the 28 students completed the questionnaire.

4. Survey results

The questionnaire survey results are presented below.

Q1: Is this your first time writing web-diary in learning Chinese?
All the participants confirmed that this was the first time they had used a web-diary in learning Chinese.

Q2: How do you rate this task in improving your language skills?

Table 1: Perceived usefulness of the web-diary task in improving students’ language skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>N (total 28)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ok</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very useful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q3: How do you judge the weighting (20%) in assessment?

Table 2: Perceived appropriateness of the 20% weighting in assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgment</th>
<th>N (total 28)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too low</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too high</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q4: Do you recommend using it for next year’s class and why?

Table 3: Recommendation rate of using the web-diary for the following year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommend or not</th>
<th>N (total 28)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons provided by those who recommended using the web-diary for the following year’s class included:

“This task improves using vocabulary learned”

“It forces you to learn words relevant to your own life”

“It allows people the freedom and flexibility to work on it when they have time”

“It compels the students to regularly express themselves in the target language. Students are also more motivated to write when the topic is of their own choice”

“It is a good way to practice using Chinese without fear of losing marks for mistakes”

“It is a great way to practice writing and integrate structural elements. Also, it is a very useful way to use both old and new knowledge in relation to personal experience since the topic is personal, a good learning tool”

Three of the 28 students (10.7%) did not recommend using the web-diary for the following year’s class. Reasons provided were:

“I have not learned proper strokes of the new words as I do in handwriting”

“There is no incentive to do it properly when mistakes don’t lose you marks”

“Very time-consuming sometimes… It is better to write on paper because actually writing on paper helps students to memorize characters quickly without having to rely on pinyin”.

Q5: How different writing Chinese this way comparing with writing on paper?

Responses indicated it is better to write on paper in order to learn strokes and radicals of characters. However, writing with a computer is a skill which needs to be mastered and is considered essential in today’s world. It is also easier and more interesting.
Q6: Do you see any advantages of using self-chosen theme in your diary-entries and what are they?

Twenty-three of the 28 participants (82%) saw some advantages of using a self-chosen theme in their web-diary entries. The reasons provided included:

“Yes, it allows me to write what I like”

“It makes me more passionate about the writing”

“The writer chose the theme and it is easier to continue”

“Yes, it gives us a chance to learn words relevant to our own lives”

“Yes, it allows you to pursue your own interest in writing and makes Chinese learning more interesting”.

Q7: Do you think the minimum characters requirement (120 for ours) for each entry necessary and why?

Twenty-seven out of the 28 participants (96%) responded that the minimum characters requirement was necessary and most people cited the reason that a certain amount of writing must be guaranteed before writing skills were improved. Two students stated that they might write only one sentence if there was no minimum length requirement. Only one student believed he would not need this requirement since his entries exceeded the minimum each week.

Q8: Do you believe feedback is necessary or useful and why?

Twenty-five out of the 28 students (89%) responded positively, with responses including:

“Yes, corrections are essential if we are to learn”

“Yes, recognition is needed for continual effort”

“Yes, it is both necessary and useful so the teacher knows how you are doing”

“Yes, it is very useful. This is the best part of this assignment”.

Q9: What is your general comment in using web-diary this semester?

Twenty-four out of the 28 students (86%) were positive with one of the responses below:

“It is a good approach to learning”

“It is useful for learning Chinese. I put a lot of thought and time into each entry”

“I like it. I wish I would have made it more creative”
“I loved it, it is a great way of learning Chinese”

“I enjoy using the web-diary since it taught me how to write Chinese characters on the computer, and I also get to practice using new words”

“It is a good assignment for this class”

Q10: Please provide your suggestions to make better use of web-diary in learning Chinese:

Fifteen students (54%) responded to this request for suggestions with either “I like the way it is” or “none I can think of right now”. Four students gave constructive suggestions:

“Make the deadline at midnight instead of 5:00pm to give people a bit more time”

“Maybe ask us to apply some patterns that we learn in our lessons to the diary”

“More feedback”

“Increase minimum character requirement to at least 150”.

The remaining nine students (32%) did not provide any responses.

5. Discussion

As the survey results show, all the participants confirmed that this was their first experience of using a web-diary task to learn Chinese, which may indicate that CALL tasks are not so widely used in CFL classrooms yet. More effort is needed to promote the use of CALL tasks in foreign language classrooms, as such tasks provide “increased flexibility, reduced negative effect, and the ability to cater to differing learning styles” (Jiang & Ramsay 2005: 47).

Among the 28 students surveyed, nine considered the web-diary CALL task very useful and thirteen considered it useful in improving their language skills. Nearly 80% of the participants regarded it as a useful task for learning the target language. By employing web-diary weekly task, students engaged in meaningful learning contexts and applied their personal social-cultural experience into the writing activity, which helped motivate their writing impulse. With teaching hours being reduced in the recent decades, the classroom time was simply not sufficient to make a noticeable difference in improving students’ writing skills. Therefore, it is necessary for students to engage in contextualized extended learning practice outside the classroom. The web-diary CALL task made it possible and compulsory for such learning practice.

As for the appropriateness of the assessment weighting, 21 out of the 28 participants (75%) indicated that the 20% weighting was “appropriate”, 4 students indicated it was too high, 2 students indicated that they were not sure and 1 student
regarded it as too low. It seems that the 20% weighting is appropriate not only because the majority of the participants believed so, but because it seems proportionate to the amount of time and effort it required in completing the task. If the weighting had been too low, some students may have chosen not to do it. If the weighting was too high, both the instructor and students may have felt it was too difficult to achieve.

Participants were asked whether they would recommend using the task for the following year’s class and why. Twenty-four out of the 28 participants (86%) indicated “yes” with three students indicating “no”, which confirms again that the majority of the participants had positive perceptions of the task. The following reasons were given by students as to why they felt the task was useful: “freedom of choosing what to write”, “the desire of sharing personal experience”, and “feel like writing”.

Students were asked to reflect on the web-diary task in comparison with other modes of writing. Students’ responses indicated that they felt it was useful to gain skills in computer writing, although it was acknowledged that it prevented them from practising strokes and radicals. As a result, it is recommended that students be given a mixture of writing tasks, some on paper and some using a computer.

The majority of students, twenty-two out of the 28 participants (82%), responded positively to being able to choose their own writing themes for the task. Again “freedom of choosing what to write” was highly appreciated by most students and would therefore appear to be a strong motivating factor, enabling the task to be more meaningful.

In response to whether there should be a minimum character requirement in the writing task, 27 of the 28 participants (96%) responded that it was necessary, with most students suggesting that a certain amount of writing practice was needed before writing skills could be improved. The character requirement enables the writing of a meaningful composition; it appears a lesser requirement may result in reduced effort and attention being given to the task, as a result of competing demands from other responsibilities.

As for feedback, 25 out of the 28 students (89%) responded that it is necessary and useful. Several students mentioned that “feedback was the best part of this assignment”. As Hyland and Hyland (2006) claim, feedback is widely viewed—in education as well as in second language classrooms — as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning; this study confirms that feedback is simply expected and regarded as essential in the learning of writing skills. Tsutsui (2004: 374) proposed three types of feedback in teacher-student language-learning environments: interactive, intrusive, and delayed feedback. He stated that interactive feedback cannot benefit all students, owing to the many variables that affect the classroom such as time limits, number of students, and students’ personalities. The disadvantage of intrusive feedback is that instructors have to interrupt students’ performance in the middle of conversation. Delayed feedback, which is the type of feedback used in this study, appears most welcome and appreciated.
Responses to the last two questions in the survey indicate that the majority of this cohort of students had a good experience in general in completing the web-diary CALL task in their CFL classroom. The way the task was handled played an important role in making students’ learning experience a successful one.

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how well the web-diary CALL task was received by learners and what type of scaffolding measures were required to make the use of such a task successful in a foreign language classroom. The findings suggest that this cohort of participants enjoyed using the web-diary CALL task in learning in the CFL. Such a CALL task seemed quite new to this cohort of students as all the participants confirmed that this was the first time they had used a web-diary. In rating how useful this task was, 78% of the participants perceived the use of web-diary task as being very useful (32%) or as useful (46%) in improving their language skills. Four (18%) rated it as being ok while one (4%) thought the task was not useful. In regards to the weighting in assessment, the majority (75%) considered a weighting of 20% as appropriate. When asked whether they would recommend using the task for next year’s class, 24 of the 28 participants (86%) said yes. Moreover, 23 of the 28 participants (82%) saw some advantage in using self-chosen topics in writing their web-diary entries. Students appreciated the freedom to choose their own topics for writing practice. In terms of the minimum length requirement for each entry, 27 of the 28 participants (96%) responded that the minimum length requirement was necessary, with most students suggesting that a certain amount of writing practice was needed before writing skills could be improved. When asked whether feedback was necessary or useful, 25 of the 28 participants (89%) responded positively. When asked about their general comments and any suggestions to make better use of web-diary, the majority enjoyed doing the task and more than half (54%) responded that they liked the way it was. Minor changes were suggested such as postponing the deadline from 5pm to midnight, encouraging the incorporation of language structures learnt during lessons, the provision of increased feedback and an increase in the minimum length requirement from 120 to 150 characters. During the handling of the CALL task in the CFL classroom, the author was convinced that scaffolding measures were crucial for the task to be successfully implemented.

In order to provide an instruction model for the successful application of this web-diary CALL task in classroom, the author wishes to summarize the following scaffolding measures for instructors to employ:

(1) Appropriate weighting in assessment: The web-diary task accounted for 20% of the final grade in the CHINA301 course in this study. The majority of the students regarded it as appropriate although a small number of them thought it was too high. It would appear that 15-20% is a good percentage. The weighting can be adjusted within this range according to the length of each web-diary entry. When a longer entry is required, the weighting can be made slightly higher and vice versa.
(2) A minimum length requirement for each web-diary entry: The author required her students to write at least 120 Chinese characters for each entry. Most students considered this length requirement necessary and appropriate. It can be longer if the students’ language proficiency is higher or the weighting in assessment is higher.

(3) A self-chosen theme spanning a student’s web-diary entries: The students in this study especially favoured this feature of the web-diary task. When students were asked to write what they like to write, they felt more passionate and motivated in their writing. By writing on their own favourite topics, their own personal lives were integrated into their language learning experience. This makes learning relevant to their life, and a more meaningful experience.

(4) A friendly and measured approach to technical aspects of the web-diary task: Learners were asked to practise posting entries for the first week, with no penalties given for problems encountered, nor credit given for success. In the second week, credit was given to learners who tried posting their entries, regardless of their success. From the third week onwards, successful posting was the criterion for receiving credit.

(5) Considered and timely feedback on learner diary entries: In the feedback, maintaining a balance between encouragement and error correction is important. Encouragement in the feedback is necessary for the learners to develop confidence, and error correction is a specific requirement for them to improve. Learners tend to rely on teachers’ positive evaluations to gain a sense of achievement and esteem, which also helps to motivate learners to learn more actively and effectively.

References


Chapelle, C.A. 1998. Multimedia CALL: Lessons to be learned from research on instructed SAL. Language Learning & Technology 2(1), 22-34.


**Appendix**

Questionnaire on web-diary use in the Chinese as a foreign language classroom

1. Is this your first time in writing web-diary in learning Chinese?
   
   (1) yes....(2) no

2. How do you rate this task in improving your language skills?
   
   (1) Very useful  (2) useful  (3) ok  (4) not very useful  (5) not useful

3. How do you judge the weighting (20%) in assessment?
   
   (1) too low....(2) not sure....(3) appropriate....(4) too high

4. Do you recommend using this task for next year’s class and why?
   
   (1) yes....(2) no
   
   Because:

5. How different writing Chinese this way in comparing writing on paper?

6. Do you see any advantages of using self-chosen theme in your diary-entries and what are they?

7. Do you think the minimum length requirement (120 characters) for each entry necessary and why?

8. Do you believe feedback is necessary? Or useful? And why?

9. What is your general comment in using web-diary this semester?

10. Please provide your suggestions to make better use of web-diary in learning Chinese.