Colloquium

Enhancing classroom interactivity and engagement: CFL Learners’ perceptions of the application of Web 2.0 technology

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Introduction
Along with the evolution of Internet development, teaching and learning in higher education are experiencing a reformation (Barnes, Marateo & Ferris, 2007; Collins & Halverson, 2009). Utilizing the Internet as a platform, Web 2.0 has formed an interactive affinity between Web content producers and recipients and has transformed the process of unidirectional information retrieval into a network-driven interchange with online community users (Armstrong & Franklin, 2008; Brown & Adler, 2008; Kearns & Frey, 2010). New resources such as blogs, wikis, voice applications, social networking sites, and virtual communities have allowed people with common interests to meet, share ideas, and collaborate in innovative ways (Collis & Moonen, 2008; Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009). Web 2.0 is creating a participatory medium and culture for user-contributed learning.

This trend is in evidence in the U.S. university system where Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) learning is become more prevalent. Compared to a traditional CFL classroom, Web 2.0 technology provides a possible improvement in instructional design, course delivery, and student learning for language education (Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). Web advances have encouraged many language coordinators to consider adopting computers, the Internet, and Web-based tools in CFL classroom settings to enhance technology-mediated learning (Chan, 2003; Chen & Liu, 2008; Huang, Hsin & Chiu, 2010; Yao, 2009). Nonetheless, only a small amount of research has been focused on investigating the incorporation of the tools of Web 2.0 technology as supportive teaching and learning aids within the curriculum and instruction of CFL. Thus, the present study explores CFL learner perceptions of the blending of Web 2.0-supported learning with a conventional classroom approach.

Methods

Procedure
The adoption and implementation of Web 2.0 technology was derived from a framework of blended learning in CFL proposed by Huang, Lin and Chiang (2010). The major purpose of Web 2.0 integration was to provide learners with better language learning opportunities and with an interactive communication and community-centered blended environment that was grounded in traditional lecture-based settings. The selection of technology use included blogs, vokis, and wikis (see Table 1). Tutorial sessions were provided in the classroom when necessary.

Participants
The research site was based on an intermediate/advanced CFL class at a Southwestern U.S. state university. The class had 14 students, from which four students volunteered for a semi-structured interview about their perspectives of Web 2.0 technology use. The participating students noted
that they were comfortable using technology and the Internet in their daily lives, which indicated they possessed digital native characteristics associated with generation Y (Black, 2010).

Results and discussion
The student interviews generated four major themes.

Blogs offered a form- and meaning-focused writing exercise
Students used blogs to complete fill-in-the-blank sentences and answer open-ended questions provided by an instructor. Using blogging for supplementary writing, students had to use their conceptual knowledge to compose their writing in grammatical forms and consider the meanings of sentences in context. The instructor was able to monitor each student’s linguistic progress and errors, and provide form-focused suggestions in the form of corrective feedback. For example, subjects S1 and S3 showed their preference for using pinyin software to compose essays because of their intention to pursue business as a career. Nevertheless, subjects S2 and S4 pinpointed a drawback in the use of pinyin software for composing Chinese sentences and essays, in that students did not literally practise Chinese character handwriting. All respondents were positive about Web-based writing exercises.

Vokis increased opportunities for oral practice and metalinguistic awareness
Vokis offered students extra opportunities to practise their speaking. Students noted that online recordings enabled them to rehearse and self-monitor the tone and pronunciation of their own speech, as well as having the ability to wait to submit their recording only when they felt satisfied with it. In the conventional face-to-face speaking assessment, they had to take an impromptu test after previous preparation and practice at home. S2 was excited about the possibility of redoing the speaking work, and her teacher did notice improvement in her speaking fluency. S1 and S3 also mentioned that because of the pressure of a timed recording, they were required to complete the reading exercises in a fully controlled fashion, thereby enhancing their fluency and proficiency levels. Nonetheless, S3 disliked the creation of an avatar on a voki, owing to the perceived irrelevance of the speaking tasks per se, and the fact that the software was sometimes annoying in the process of selecting the images. Students were satisfied with the opportunities that a voki provided, in that it integrated into their speech the vocabulary and sentences they had learned in class. Regardless of students’ disposition toward this approach, they were able to respond to the instructor’s listening prompt without feeling embarrassed to speak up in class.

Wikis pulled learners together in a group collaborative writing project
The students acknowledged that creating wikis had a positive impact on the development of their writing skills, collaborative skills, and level of community engagement. They reported that a wiki was an innovative tool in the CFL classroom, and referred to it as one that they had never used before. The wiki project inspired creativity in writing, and learners with lower proficiency levels may have benefited the most from this particular group work. In addition, they emphasized the importance of the instructor’s guidance and feedback offered during the different phases of

Table 1: Web 2.0-supported activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web 2.0 tool</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Pedagogical use in class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td><a href="http://www.blogger.com">http://www.blogger.com</a></td>
<td>Iterative sentence making and short open-ended questions from the textbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voki</td>
<td><a href="http://www.voki.com">http://www.voki.com</a></td>
<td>Recording of a predetermined text in 1 minute chunking with avatar creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki</td>
<td><a href="http://www.wikispaces.com">http://www.wikispaces.com</a></td>
<td>Story telling with a picture created using sequential drawing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the writing process. Among the four students who were interviewed, only S2 preferred the individual project because of her concerns about the influence of her own performance on the team. She felt uncomfortable about showcasing her writing to her peers, given the mistakes she felt she had made. According to the observations of S1, S2, and S3, a greater mastery of the language gave the heritage CFL learners advantages over the non-heritage learners in helping teammates organize content and make error corrections. There remained a necessity for face-to-face meetings at the opening and close of the wiki projects. These meetings facilitated group members to get to know one another better and gave everyone an opportunity to verbally clarify ideas and word usage.

The importance of teacher feedback in foreign language learning
According to the reflections of the four students, their teacher’s feedback was indispensable in helping them understand their individual language issues. Intermediate/advanced learners had a certain level of language knowledge and skills that allowed them to make judgments about the correctness of sentences, so that they were able to share some responsibility for their own writing accuracy or provide peer feedback. However, they trusted their instructor’s feedback to a greater degree, because of the instructor’s level of expertise and base of knowledge in the language. Therefore, teacher feedback can leverage the effectiveness of peer feedback for checking the appropriateness and credibility of opinions provided by students.

Conclusion and implications
Our exploratory study of this CFL classroom shows that Web 2.0-supported Chinese curriculum indeed stimulated active individual participation, group collaborative work, and creativity. Participation in each selected tool was high and proved to be quite successful for a first-time trial. Existing Web 2.0 technology provides easy-to-use interfaces for language teachers and learners. The results impart positive evidence that the integration of Web 2.0 technology into a CFL learning environment can be effective in terms of student satisfaction with the course by improving their learning and language competency and by enhancing their interactions with peers and faculty members. This changes the student role from one of passive to active learning and allows students to better create and retain knowledge that will be useful in their future workplaces. The results of the present study suggest that CFL teachers should explore the affordability and exploit the capacities of Web 2.0 technology and take advantage of the pedagogical potential offered by this new, technologically driven approach.

Acknowledgements
The authors are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and to Dr W.-H. Teng for her support in this project. Any errors are exclusively our own.

References


