Web 2.0 and Authentic Foreign Language Learning at Higher Education Level

Maria de Lurdes Correia Martins[a*],
Gillian Moreira[b], and António Moreira[b]

a. Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Viseu, Portugal
b. University of Aveiro, Campus Universitário de Santiago, Aveiro, Portugal

Abstract. Web 2.0 has afforded a number of opportunities for foreign language learning due to its open, participatory and social nature. A crucial aspect is authenticity – both situational and interactional – since students become involved in meaningful tasks, interacting in the target language with an authentic audience. In this paper we will reflect upon the potential of Web 2.0 tools, namely social networks, wikis and podcasts in enhancing foreign language learning opportunities at higher education level under the Bologna process. An action research project was carried out with undergraduate tourism students from Portugal. During two semesters, interactional tasks using Web 2.0 applications and involving the construction of collaborative outputs were designed and implemented, with the main goal of promoting and developing interactive communication skills in English amongst students with low levels of motivation and prior learning. Data was collected at different stages of the project aided by different data collection tools, namely questionnaires, focus group interviews, individual interviews, written reflections and corpus analyses, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used. Results point towards impacts on students' language awareness, which has contributed to the creation of opportunities for language self-development, enhancing autonomous learning. In addition, it increased motivation for language learning by providing more opportunities for authentic input, social interaction and collaboration through the target language. Finally, the development of meta-competences such as metacognition and meta-learning can be highlighted.

Keywords: authenticity, collaborative learning, English as a foreign language, web 2.0.

1. Introduction

Web 2.0's open, participatory and social nature has given dialogue a prominent place in the knowledge building process. The construction of meaningful learning will greatly

* Contact author: lurdesmartins@estv.ipv.pt

depend on learners' capacity to engage in the creation and maintenance of dialogic processes. However, the primacy of dialogue in learning does not directly emerge from the spread of Web 2.0. Dialogue, according to Ravenscroft (2011), is "coevolving with these technologies, which arguably provide social opportunities that are more open, and are used more often, than was previously possible with the traditional methods of communication, dialogue, and discourse" (p. 142). Associated with dialogue, we have the concepts of dialectic and dialogic, which have been suggested as a structural pedagogy for the twenty-first century (Dalsgaard, 2009; Ravenscroft, Wegerif, & Hartley, 2007). Hence, we consider dialectic and dialogic as two relevant dimensions that focus on complementary aspects of the role of dialogue in the learning process. While dialectic emphasises cognitive and epistemic dimensions, dialogic gives primacy to emotional and interpersonal dimensions. The interrelation of the two dimensions in the learning process is emphasised by Ravenscroft et al. (2007): "The desire to reason to progress towards a rational synthesis does not have to override the need to understand others, and likewise, the desire to understand others does not have to override the often pragmatic need to reach a rational consensus that links to purposeful action in a context" (p. 46).

The integration of these principles in the structuring, planning and execution of communicative tasks is both complex and challenging. First of all, the process begins with a multiplicity of definitions and views of 'task'. Regarding this, Ollivier and Puren (2011), as a result of a critical analysis of different perspectives, listed and summarised the most relevant characteristics of a task:

- Focus should be on meaning and the mobilisation of language skills should come naturally when attempting to solve the task;
- The completion of a task leads to an accurate outcome;
- A task is not, generally, exclusively linguistic;
- Resolution of a task involves social interaction;
- Task execution is affected by certain constraints and limitations;
- Solving tasks involves the deployment of cognitive processes and different skills;
- Tasks involve different steps or sub-tasks;
- Tasks should privilege authenticity.

Authenticity is also emphasised by Nunan (2004), who distinguishes between real world, target tasks and pedagogical tasks. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) also alludes to real-life, target or rehearsal tasks conceived as "tasks [...] chosen on the basis of learners' needs outside the classroom, whether in the personal and public domains, or related to more specific occupational or educational needs" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 157). Ellis (2003) goes deeper in this matter and refers to two types of authenticity: situational and interactional. Situational authenticity is related to real world activities, while interactional authenticity demands that learners' communicative reaction or response is genuine,

similar to the real world. In our view, Web 2.0 has promoted new opportunities for foreign language classes, allowing the implementation of tasks that involve both types of authenticity. These capabilities are highlighted by Mangenot and Louveau (2006), who add on the concepts of similarity and likelihood. In addition, Ollivier and Puren (2011) present a diagram that emphasises the role of interaction and co-action in performing a task, stressing the role of Web 2.0 as a privileged space for the assessment of co-action.

2. Method

The methodological approach adopted for this study consisted of an action research project (see Figure 1, adapted from Stringer, 2007) over two semesters, in the English II and English III course units from the degree course in Tourism at the School of Technology and Management, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu. Stemming from the core theme of each course unit and intended learning outcomes, interactional tasks using Web 2.0 tools and involving the construction of collaborative outputs were designed and implemented.

Figure 1. Action research project outline
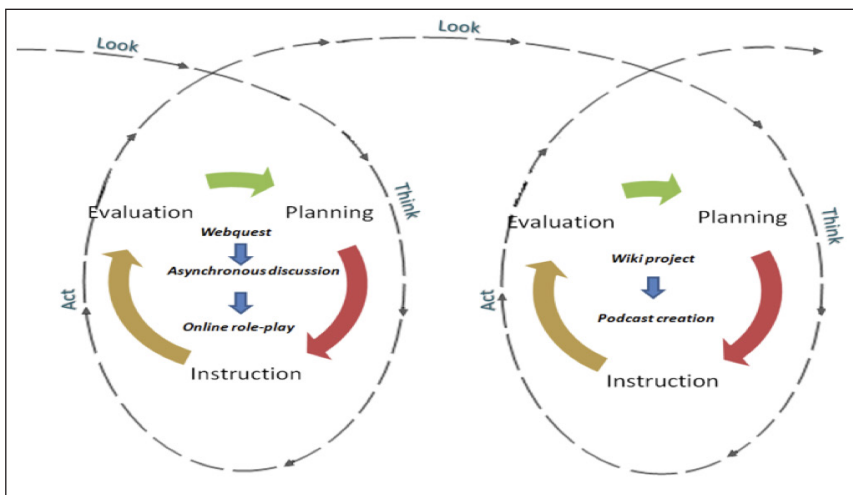
The planning of tasks took into account data analyses from a preliminary demographics questionnaire, more precisely students' low familiarity with Web 2.0 tools, as well as the fact that most of them never had the opportunity to use them in educational settings. The learning outcomes set for the different activities were defined according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, level B2 (comprehension and production) and level B1 (interaction).

3. Findings

Data analysis points to a markedly positive impact of Web 2.0 tools on the implementation of interactional tasks in English language learning in higher education. Table 1 summarises the most relevant findings of each task implemented.

Table 1.   Most relevant findings

Task	Main strengths	Main difficulties
Webquest "Discover London"	Increased motivation; Vocabulary acquisition; Opportunities for the development of communicative competence in English; Contact with meaningful tourism-related information.	Understanding the information displayed on some websites.
Asynchronous Discussions	Vocabulary learning; Writing skills; Information sharing; Metacognition skills.	Collaborative work; Written comprehension; Fear of exposure.
Online role-play: planning a school trip to London	Writing skills; Vocabulary learning; Increased opportunities to use English; Cultural awareness.	Collaborative work; Selection of accurate information.
Wiki project: Visit Viseu	A positive attitude toward online group collaboration; Integrity of contributions; Fulfilment of agreed-upon roles; Constructive additions and revisions to improve the project outcomes.	Most information sources were only available in Portuguese; Portuguese – English translation using Google Translate (mistranslation problems); Linguistic performance correlated with a lack of strategic competence in using available tools.
Podcast creation: Viseu attractions you mustn't miss!	Accurate information and succinct concepts are presented; Students' assessment of the final output is positive; Students' perceptions are influenced by their metalinguistic awareness.	Delivery is hesitant, and choppy, giving the impression of reading; Enunciation, expression, and rhythm are sometimes distracting.

4. Discussion

The use of authentic materials proved to be very positive, since students were confronted with authentic language, which, most of the time, is different from the one that commonly appears in textbooks where the practice is confined by the language structures and vocabulary defined for a given level of proficiency and, therefore, decontextualised from their speakers, values and cultural norms. It also allowed respecting students' idiosyncrasies and learning styles, given that activities combined face-to-face with e-learning. Another aspect that should be highlighted is the promotion of autonomy in conducting research in English language and the promotion of strategic competence, since students frequently used online translation tools and online dictionaries. The creation of the learning community "English for Tourism" in Grouply

social network was the driving force of the collaborative work developed over the two semesters. In order to play an active role in the asynchronous discussions, students needed to understand and select relevant information to later write a comment sustained at specific facts. This way, it was possible to promote eclectic learning, combining reception and interaction activities.

Students recognised Web 2.0 potential in learning English, emphasising the acquisition of vocabulary and the development of writing skills. This was mainly due to increased opportunities to communicate in English outside the physical walls of the classroom. Also, the sharing of ideas among participants contributed to the production of more complete outcomes and it also promoted an increased metalinguistic awareness.

Regarding interactional authenticity, there was a concern with the sociolinguistic appropriateness of their written productions, particularly the use of a formal style in the task related to the creation of the wiki "Visit Viseu". Collaborative work was transverse to the different activities and constituted a strength and an obstacle to the proposed activities. This difficulty in working collaboratively as a class can be explained by the innovative character of the tasks implemented. It is common practice for students to complete work in pairs or small groups, but not so when the group is constituted by all the students in the class.

5. Conclusions

This study represents an innovative and very positive contribution for applied linguistics studies, legitimising Web 2.0 applications as an exceptional strategy in meeting the goals raised by the Bologna process, allowing us to highlight the following aspects:

- Web 2.0, for enhanced English language learners among undergraduates, has allowed an active involvement of students in solving authentic tasks, combining both situational and interactional authenticity, and articulating different linguistic activities defined by the CEFRL, thus contributing to the development of a plurilingual and pluricultural competence;
- Students who participated in both action research cycles developed capabilities to manage their own learning process, making decisions about contents and materials (what), strategies (how), time / pace (when) and space (where);
- The dialectical, dialogical and actional approaches used promoted a deeper student involvement in interactive processes through the use of diverse strategies, hence promoting the development of skills leading to improvements in English language teaching and learning in higher education;
- There was a correlation between linguistic performance and the strategic use of available tools, namely the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies by some learners, allowing them to plan and monitor their learning process, and become aware of the strategies used to solve the proposed tasks and, ultimately, their language learning strategies.

References

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalsgaard, C. (2009). From transmission to dialogue: Personalised and social knowledge media. *MedieKultur, 25*(46), 18-33. Retrieved from http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/mediekultur/article/download/1333/1486

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mangenot, F., & Louveau, E. (2006). *Internet et la classe de langue*. Paris: CLE International.

Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-Based Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ollivier, C., & Puren, L. (2011). *Le web 2.0 en la classe de langue.* Paris: Editions Maison des Langues.

Ravenscroft, A. (2011). Dialogue and connectivism: A new approach to understanding and promoting dialogue-rich networked learning. *The International Review Of Research In Open And Distance Learning, 12*(3), 139-160. Retrieved from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/934

Ravenscroft, A., Wegerif, R. B., & Hartley, J. R. (2007). Reclaiming thinking: Dialectic, dialogic and learning in the digital age. In J. Underwood & J. Dockrell (Eds.), *Learning through Digital Technologies* (pp. 39-57). Leicester : British Psychological Society.

Stringer, E. (2007). *Action Research*. London: Sage.

CALL: Using, Learning, Knowing
EUROCALL Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden
22-25 August 2012, Proceedings
Edited by Linda Bradley and Sylvie Thouësny

The moral right of the authors has been asserted