

# Communicating with the World: Connecting the Language Classroom to a Global Audience Using Web 2.0 Tools

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## A BLOG SUCCESS STORY

One day last year, one of our high school Spanish teachers was working on a poetry unit with her intermediate Spanish students. Students were asked to write poems in Spanish on a variety of topics, and then upload their poems to the class blog for homework. Students were also encouraged to read and comment on each other's work. The link to the student poems was shared with parents, other classes in the school, and the community via a ListServ. Students enjoyed reading the comments from their classmates, those of other Spanish teachers, and Spanish-speaking community members. But the most exciting comment came from a total stranger! A published poet in Peru stumbled on the class blog and commented on one student's poetry. He said that he was

impressed with the student's writing, and he encouraged her to continue writing. Needless to say, the student was thrilled. She felt a sense of accomplishment about her writing in a way that encouragement and praise from her teacher could never match. This was because:

- the comment came from an *expert*: He made his living writing poetry, and was thus uniquely qualified to judge her talent in this area.
- the commenter was a *native speaker*: As a native speaker of Spanish, his affirmation of the student's proficiency carried special weight.
- the commenter was a *stranger*: He did not know the student, nor did he have any vested interest in her success in the language. Unlike her teacher, the poet didn't need to praise the student

in order to keep her interest in studying Spanish or because he liked the student.

The blog had provided this student – and the entire class – with a global audience for their work in Spanish. It made the work matter *more* than if it had just been handed into the teacher, given a grade, and filed away in a folder or notebook.

## *The Importance of a Global Audience*

The World Wide Web has transformed since its inception from a repository for data, photos, text and other resources to a more interactive

arena where users can just as easily search for information, as can create and share it. This shift from the first “incarnation” of the Web to the second, more interactive version inspired the term “Web 2.0.” Web 2.0 tools allow users – in this case, students – to create, upload, and share their work in the target language for a much wider audience than exists within the confines of the classroom. Students can publish their work for the broader school community, parents, family members in country and abroad, and even for strangers.

When we give our students assignments to practice productive language – to produce writing or speech in the target language – we teachers are almost always the primary audience for their work. They turn in essays, poetry, or creative writing assignments, we read them, and assess the value of the language project based on a rubric or other metric. When students are asked to speak as part of a role play, skit, or other oral presentation, their audience expands, including their friends and classmates. But how often do we afford students the opportunity to connect with a global audience? Using a variety of free tools on the World Wide Web, language teachers can provide students with this authentic audience, while also leveraging the popularity of social networks, online worlds, and other web-based platforms for learning.

## *Conclusion*

Webtools provide language students a uniquely authentic audience with which to share their creativity and growing proficiency in the target language. In our experience, students tend to write/speak more

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## Creating with Webtools

We all remember Bloom's Taxonomy from our teacher training coursework. Now that we are well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we must incorporate webtools into this paradigm and think about the ways in which they help us to reach that important apex.

The four websites that appear in the area labeled "Creating" represent four excellent tools that can be incorporated into the World Language and ESL classroom to facilitate students' oral and written expressive language: VoiceThread, podcasts, blogs and wikis.

**VoiceThread** ([www.VoiceThread.com](http://www.VoiceThread.com)): VoiceThread is an online media album that allows students to display images (illustrations, photos, maps, etc.) and post and collect comments in one of three formats: text, audio, or video. This tool allows students to have an asynchronous online conversation about the image or topic. It is particularly useful for:

- virtual tours of different towns, states, countries, important sites around the

- world
- autobiographies
- visual representations of novels, stories, picture-books
- evidence to support an argument using visual data or primary sources
- debates on a topic or essential question

**Podcasts** (e.g., [www.Podomatic.com](http://www.Podomatic.com), [www.PodBean.com](http://www.PodBean.com)): A podcast is a collection of audio files that can be posted on the Internet – often on a podcast housing site or a teacher's homepage, blog or wiki. Projects can include:

- classroom news

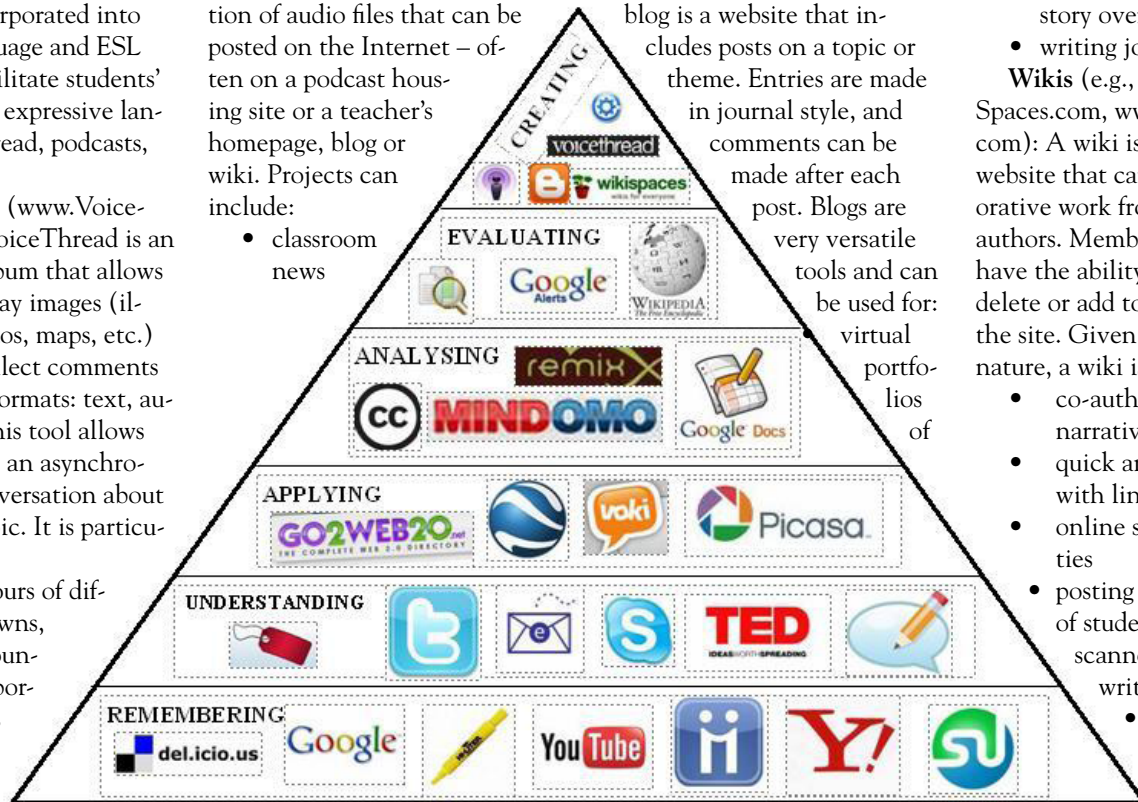
- reports
- weather and science reports
- old-time radio soap operas
- oral history interviews with parents, teachers, community members
- mapping a school or community
- poetry recitation and pronunciation practice

**Blogs** (e.g., [www.Blogger.com](http://www.Blogger.com), [www.EduBlogs.com](http://www.EduBlogs.com)): A blog is a website that includes posts on a topic or theme. Entries are made in journal style, and comments can be made after each post. Blogs are very versatile tools and can be used for: virtual portfolios of

- student work collected over time
- creative writing, poetry collections
- commenting on essential questions, class debates
- responding to photos of art, historical figures, audio files of music or speeches
- detective or suspense stories in installments (different blog posts build on the story over time)
- writing journals or diaries

**Wikis** (e.g., [www.WikiSpaces.com](http://www.WikiSpaces.com), [www.WikiDot.com](http://www.WikiDot.com)): A wiki is an easy-to-edit website that can include collaborative work from a variety of authors. Members of a wiki all have the ability to upload, edit, delete or add to the content on the site. Given its collaborative nature, a wiki is useful for:

- co-authoring of essays or narratives
- quick and easy websites with links and resources
- online study communities
- posting and sharing of student work (i.e., scanned art images, writing, etc.)
- collaborative storytelling projects



M.Fisher 2009 [digigogy.blogspot.com](http://digigogy.blogspot.com)

– and better – when using these tools in the language classroom. They form an enjoyable and pedagogically sound way of getting students to create and have fun with language. But most importantly, webtools provide language students with a global platform through which to engage in collaborative creation of content and sharing of information across time zones and cultures. These tools allow students to meet many of the 5 Cs:

- **communicate** in the target language in VoiceThreads or podcasts
- explore **cultures** by interacting with the products, practices and perspectives of keypals and Skype partners
- **connect** to other disciplines through online research projects via wikis

- **compare** their L1 to the target language through blog posts
- But it is the **Communities** standard that exemplifies the best potential of online tools for “participation in multilingual communities at home and around the world.” (ACTFL Standards, accessed online: [http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/StandardsforFLExecsumm\\_rev.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/StandardsforFLExecsumm_rev.pdf)). In using webtools, students not only participate in multilingual communities, but in essence, expand these communities and develop new ones via social networking exchanges and the creation of videos and other online media for sharing and commenting.

Webtools allow our students to communicate with a global audience by providing authentic access to the world outside our

classroom doors. It is essential that we incorporate at least some of these tools into our teaching of languages – not only for the excitement they engender in our digital native students, but for the ways in which they empower them to connect across cultures using a medium that is both intuitive and transformative for this generation of kids. Webtools provide K-12 students with interlocutors who may not speak their language, but who “*speak their language*” in more ways than we know!

For tutorials and links to teacher examples of these – and other – webtools in action, visit my website, [MisCositas.com](http://www.miscositas.com) (<http://www.miscositas.com/webtools>). Happy exploring!