

WEB 2.0 TOOLS IN A LANGUAGE CLASS: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Ludmila RĂCIULA

English and German Philology Department, USARB

Abstract. *The twenty first century is rightly considered the epoch of technology and speed, the two terms being often used together, implying that technology helps the users perform a task spending less time on it and making it more attractive. Teaching and learning has also changed under the influence of the new technological advances. A language class is rarely carried out without the use of any technology, be it directly through the use of Web 2.0 tools in the classroom, or using them to prepare for the class. Learners use social media, You Tube channels, online learning tools to communicate with their peers in English, to perform some tasks, or to improve their skills. Thus, no matter whether we want it or not, technology has already occupied a substantial niche in the field of language teaching. This article presents the background of the issue of technology in the classroom, as well as the benefits and challenges of using Web 2.0 tools by teachers and learners.*

Key words: *Digital technology, Web 2.0 tools, motivation, benefit, challenge.*

Introduction

Traditionally, digital technology has been used by language teachers to seek content that could be used in a language class, such as audio or video recordings, various handouts, games, etc. The Internet gave the possibility to the English language teachers throughout the world to communicate, exchange and share ideas and handouts. English language teachers have created virtual communities, where they discuss the issues they face in their activity, propose solutions and exchange teaching materials that they found on the vast Internet, or more recently, which they have created themselves, the latter case being of particular interest for this article.

Applying technology in the language classroom, the teacher can create a learning environment, where communication is authentic and relevant to the learners, focusing on issues that are important for the learners. This article focuses on the digital tools that work best in the language classroom, the advantages of their use and difficulties faced by both educators and learners.

Background

New technologies, such as social networks, Skype, Google hangouts, blogs and many others provide new opportunities for foreign language teaching, as they incorporate both individual and group communication via networked computers. According to Prensky, students born after 1980 are digital natives, because they have grown up with digital media and spend much time engaging in new digital activities and on the Internet [10, 1-6]. He estimated that current college students spend less than 5,000 hours reading, but more than 10,000 hours playing video games. A more recent trend among young population, is their total neglect for TV, which increases the number of hours spent on the Internet.

We shall consider the statistics on the use of Facebook since it is one of the most popular social networks among the young population. According to the Statistics Portal, as of the third quarter of 2018, Facebook had 2.27 billion monthly active users. In the third quarter of 2012, the number of active Facebook users had surpassed one billion, making it the first social network ever to do so. Active users are those which have logged in to Facebook during the last 30 days. 50% of 18-24

year-olds go on Facebook when they wake up. It is also worth mentioning that Facebook is not the only social network that is widely used by the students. The table below, shows statistical data on the use of social media platforms among the young population, aged 18-24. The data reflect the current situation in the USA.

Table 1. Substantial “reciprocity” across social media platforms

Substantial ‘reciprocity’ across major social media platforms

% of __ users who also ...

	Use Twitter	Use Instagram	Use Facebook	Use Snapchat	Use YouTube	Use WhatsApp	Use Pinterest	Use LinkedIn
Twitter	–	73%	90%	54%	95%	35%	49%	50%
Instagram	50	–	91	60	95	35	47	41
Facebook	32	47	–	35	87	27	37	33
Snapchat	48	77	89	–	95	33	44	37
YouTube	31	45	81	35	–	28	36	32
WhatsApp	38	55	85	40	92	–	33	40
Pinterest	41	56	89	41	92	25	–	42
LinkedIn	47	57	90	40	94	35	49	–

Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018.
“Social Media Use in 2018”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

90% of LinkedIn users also use Facebook

Source: Pew Research Center: Internet and Technology

In our attempt to find statistical data on the use of social networking platforms in the Republic of Moldova, we found data reflecting the situation in the years 2016- 2017, without making specific reference to the age of users. Thus, the most widely used social networks in Moldova are: Odnoknassniki (1.168,000 real users), Facebook (760, 000 users), Instagram (250,000 accounts), LinkedIn (141,800 users), Tweeter (approx. 25,000 users), VKontakte (approx. 25,000 active users). Additionally, we found out the age categories of Facebook users. Thus, the statistics claims:

- 13-17 year-olds – 86,000
- 18- 24 year-olds – 190,000
- 25-34 year-olds – 250,000
- 35-44 year-olds – 120,000
- 45-54 year-olds – 58,000
- 55-64 year-olds – 35,000
- 65+ - 16,000.

Thus, we can see that 58% of Facebook users are aged between 18-34 years.

The use of Instagram shows a steady increase, thus, in 2015, there were 99,000 accounts, while in 2017- 250,000, increasing by 151,000 or 152%. Practice has shown that Instagram is mainly used by the young population.

Odnoklassniki still remains the most popular social network, boasting a total of 1.168,000 real users.

- 15-19 year-olds – 18%
- 20-29 year-olds – 31%
- 30-39 year-olds – 19%
- 40-49 year-olds – 16%

50+ 16%.

The data used in the article has been provided by the Public Opinion Barometer for the news portal Independent.

The data presented above show that most of the learners spend very much time on social media platforms, communicating, exchanging photo and video content, making new friends in the country and abroad. Therefore, it is a good opportunity for teachers to use these resources for their classes, thus succeeding to raise the learners' interest and motivation, making them do the tasks required for the class, by using the tools they are familiar with. The wide use of social media and technology has been targeted by the theorists of education and they came up with solutions on how to use this trend to the benefit of the educational process.

Literature Review

Traditionally, technology has been used by teachers to bring authentic language into the classroom. However, quite often, seeking handouts for a particular class or activity, we face the situation that the handout that we have found is not exactly what we want, being either too simple or too difficult for the class, or it does not include the vocabulary we want to use/ the grammar form we need to train. At this point, it is high time to move from being a simple consumer to being a creator of digital content. Technology allows the teacher to create engaging tasks and tailor them for a particular group of learners, taking into account their age, interests and educational needs.

Additionally, technology allows the teacher to make the change from the traditional teacher-centered class to the learner-centered one, where the learners will perform most of the activities, making individual investigations, inquires and comparisons to find answers to the problems posed by the teacher. By adopting a learner-centered approach, the educators teach learners to be individual in their studies, to be able to find answers to any question or problem on their own.

In this respect, Web 2.0 offers multiple opportunities for creating a student-centered learning environment that maximizes use of the target language, models best pedagogical practices, and promotes a standards-based curriculum through integration of the three modes of communication i.e. interpersonal, interpretive, presentational. It is important to note that shifting from a teaching to a learning centered classroom places the responsibility for learning on the learner who must be fully engaged in the act of learning through authentic tasks that emulate the real world [3, p.110]. It is the teacher who determines the learning tasks, but the learners carry them out, by interpreting the content and producing artifacts and products using Web 2.0 that provide evidence of understanding and language mastery.

The term Web 2.0 was first used in 2004 to refer to the second generation of the Internet tools that provide opportunities for promotion, production, creativity and information sharing and collaboration [11]. A more detailed definition has been offered by Anderson, who defined Web 2.0 as "networked tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationships" [1, p.4].

According to the experts in foreign language education, three conditions contribute to the optimal language classroom environment: comprehensible and rich language input, opportunities for output or practice and quality feedback [4, p. 115- 137]. Nowadays, technology has provided the teachers with the opportunity to provide comprehensive language input through the use of colorful pictures and together with spoken or written word (consider such tools as Power Point Presentations, SMART boards, You Tube, which offers a variety of recordings, including educational ones). Multimedia input contribute to the learning process since it involves the visual and audial learning and it is suitable for representatives of different learning styles. Output or practice opportunities are ensured

through the social nature of digital media, learners have the possibility to practice language using social networking, Skype, Google hangouts, they can create their own colorful video presentations, using video production tools, like Animoto, Online Movie Maker, or they can design their own book (StoryBird), overlaying a sound path on it (Voice Thread), or try their hand at directing their own comics using ToonDoo. These are just some of the digital tools the teacher can suggest to the learners or assign tasks to be fulfilled using them.

Advantages of using the Web 2.0 tools

It has been widely recognized that the use of Web 2.0 tools in the foreign language classroom is advantageous not only as a means of establishing contact with native speakers through forums or social networks, but also as a motivator for students to engage in collaboration and communication [5, p.49-53; 7, p.71-85]. If in the traditional classroom, language content is presented in form of texts and extracts from literary works, in a modern environment, Web 2.0 offers much more than simple textual information, it provides innovative ways to interact with a variety of language texts and audio input, and the opportunity to create products using the foreign language through digital storytelling, online posters, comic generators, and wikis.

In other words, the use of Web 2.0 tools offers several advantages: they are Web-based, have a collaborative character allowing for multiple users, provide storage for online content, and allow for shared content [11]. Due to these features, Web 2.0 tools make students actively engage in the learning process, producing artifacts using the foreign language and interpret texts and content through visual representations.

It is universally agreed that students learn by doing things, which is the main methodological principle for implementing communicative language teaching practices [2]. If new knowledge is connected to real-world activities, it is better integrated into long-term memory and more easily retrieved [6]. Creating products such as comic books, digital stories, or podcasts promotes language output through a hands-on approach to language learning. Furthermore, these products are ideally created as collaborative projects, promoting interaction among learners. Collaboration has been recognized as a strong facilitator of learning, and it is representative of a student-centered environment [8].

Challenges of using Web 2.0 tools

Despite the above mentioned benefits of using digital tools in the language classroom, there are several things that can challenge both the teacher and the learners, or affect the course of the lesson. In this section, we will refer to situations where technology can cause problems or interfere with the planned course of the lesson. First of all, it should always be borne in mind that technology can fail and if it does, there should always be a backup plan. For instance, if digital flashcards are made for vocabulary practice, the same cards can be printed in advance. Online games offered by the Quizlet platform can be conducted in a simplified form without technology. Perhaps, it will be less colorful, but the essence of the activity will be preserved. It is important to remember that the activities are not performed for the sake of technology but rather for training a certain skill or check some knowledge.

Another challenge faced by the foreign language teachers in Moldova is the fact that learners are often unwilling to engage in tasks requiring digital skills. The situation is rather strange, on the one hand they are digital natives, they spend most of their free time on the Internet, but on the other hand, they are reluctant to perform tasks using digital tools. This can be explained by the fact that they perceive the Internet as a means of entertainment, something that is done for fun and do not take it seriously. Quite often, they do the task focusing on the technical aspect

mainly and disregarding the language. In such cases, emphasis should be made on both aspects, the teachers can announce in advance the criteria for evaluation. This can be rubrics, which will include the requirements, specifically the linguistic aspect. We think it will help the learners focus on the language aspect and make them realize what is the real objective of the task.

Conclusion

Finally, it should be mentioned that the designing tasks and activities with the help of digital tools requires some skills and effort, especially at the initial stage, when the teacher or the learner is not experienced enough and has to gain some knowledge and skills. It might be time consuming too. However, considering the benefits of using Web 2.0, we think that it is worth acquiring and putting it in practice. Practice has shown that Web 2.0 tools yield beautiful results and teachers using them have highly motivated learners.

References

1. ANDERSON, T. Teaching a distance education course using educational social software. Retrieved from <http://terrya.edublogs.org/2006/01/02/teaching-a-distance-education-course-using-educational-social-software/>
2. BRANDL, K. Communicative language teaching in action: Putting principles to work. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008. ISBN: 9780131579064
3. BUSTAMANTE, Carolina; HURLBUT, Sheri; and KRAMER, Mogler, Aleidine "Web 2.0 and language learners: Moving from consumers to creators". In: Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education, 2012, pp.180- 189.
4. COBB, T., STEVENS, V. A principled consideration of computers and reading in a second language. In: M. Pennington (Ed.), *The power of CALL*, Houston, TX: Athelstan Publications.1996, pp. 115-137.
5. CURWOOD, J. Beyond Google. In: *Instructor*, 2010, 119(5), pp. 49-53.
6. DOUGHTY, C. J., LONG, M. Optimal psycholinguistic environments for distance foreign language learning. In: *Language Learning and Technology*, 2003 7(3), pp. 50-80.
7. HANNA, B., de NOOY, J. A funny thing happened on the way to the forum: Electronic discussion and foreign language learning. In: *Language Learning and Technology*, 2003, 7(1), pp. 71-85.
8. KAGAN, S. Cooperative learning. San Juan Capistrano, In: *Kagan Cooperative Learning*, 1992, pp. 234-235.
9. KRASHEN, S. L2 acquisition and L2 learning. In: *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. September 2008, 5(01), p.134.
10. PRENSKY, M. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." In: *On the Horizon* 2001, 9 (5), p.1-6.
11. SCHRUM, L., LEVIN, B. *Leading 21st century schools: Harnessing technology for engagement and achievement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009. ISBN: 1412972957

Online resources

Independent (<http://independent.md/grafic-social-media-moldova-cele-mai-utilizate-retele-de-socializare-hashtag-uri-si-statistici/>) Statistics Portal

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>
Pew Research Center http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/pi_2018-03-01_social-media_0-04/ Voicethread www.voicethread.com

StoryBird www.storybird.com

ToonDoon www.ToonDoon.com

Animoto www.animoto.com