

Using Weblogs for Foreign Language Learning: Promises and Challenges

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Abstract. Over the past few years, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies such as weblogs, wikis, and social networks has brought about radical changes in the field of foreign language learning. The characteristics of Web 2.0, which facilitate interactive information sharing, user-centered designs, and online collaboration, are recognized to have great potential for more effective teaching and learning foreign languages. Consequently, a growing number of researchers and teachers have been exploring the ways to integrating various Web 2.0 technologies into foreign language classrooms. Weblogs have become one of the best-received Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language education. This study explores the significant issues of using Weblogs in foreign language learning, examining the theoretical justification of using Weblogs, identifying their potential benefits and limitations, and discussing pedagogical implications and future research directions.

Keywords: Weblogs, Web 2.0, Foreign language learning, Web-based learning

1 Introduction

Over the past few years, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies such as Weblogs, wikis, and social networks has radically changed education in general, creating new opportunities for foreign language learning and teaching. With the characteristics of Web 2.0, which facilitate interactive information sharing, user-centered designs, and online collaboration, a growing number of researchers and teachers have been exploring the ways to facilitate language learning by integrating various Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language classrooms. Among various Web 2.0 technologies, Weblogs have been increasingly implemented in foreign language education across contexts. To date, various studies have focused on the benefits and limitations of using Weblogs in foreign language learning.

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This study intends to examine the theoretical aspects of using Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language learning, to identify Weblogs' potential benefits and limitations potential benefits and to discuss pedagogical implications and future research directions.

2 Theoretical Justification of Using Web 2.0

For last decades, significant theoretical paradigm shift have been occurring in the field of foreign language learning. The focus of research and pedagogy has shifted from a cognitive orientation to a social orientation, from classroom contexts to naturalistic settings, and from L2 learning to L2 use [1]. Together with these changes, concepts such as input, interaction, authenticity, and collaboration are recognized as critical factors to determine successful foreign language learning. Furthermore, negotiation of meaning in authentic contexts is considered as an imperative for language learning to occur.

Interestingly, this paradigm shift in foreign language learning shares many of the fundamental attributes of Web 2.0 technology. Although web-based foreign language learning started back in the early 90s, it had limited benefits since it was mainly based on Web 1.0 with non-participatory entity. In contrast, Web 2.0 technologies provide environments which promote active communication and collaboration among users. Two major features that distinguish Web 2.0 from Web 1.0 are the platform-based usage of the Internet and harnessing collective intelligence of Internet users. In the Web 2.0 framework, the web functions as the platform where users collaborate, exchange and data dynamically (see Table1) [2]. Web 2.0 technologies including Weblogs, podcasts, Wikis, and YouTube provide language learners with the potential for a collaboration-oriented and community-based learning environment.

Table 1. Web 1.0 vs. Web 2.0.

Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Web as Read-only	Web as Read-Write.
Web as Medium	Web as Platform
Web of geeks and techies	Web of anyone willing to try
Web as Broadcast	Web as Conversation
Web as Static	Web as Dynamic

3 Characteristics of Weblogs

Weblogs, defined as free user-friendly websites that are easily created, maintained, and updated without any knowledge of HTML, have various characteristics that attract language educators and learners [3].

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- **Relevance:** Weblogs allow teachers and learners to upload content relevant to their courses and promote student-teacher, student-student, and student-others interactions about the postings.
- **Accessibility:** Weblogs are accessible to whoever is interested in making contributions in a relatively long period of time without moving physically or attending face-to-face classes
- **Interactivity:** Weblogs can be easily integrated with multimedia features including images, songs, podcasts, and videos.
- **Interest:** Weblogs give students equal chances to participate, which have the potential to enhance learners' voluntary contributions.

With these characteristics, weblogs not only facilitate exchanging information and expanding communication but also provide learners with possibilities to enhance their language learning. In the field of foreign language learning, three types of weblog are used: the tutor weblog, the learner weblog, and the class weblog (see Table 2) [4].

Table 2. Three Weblog Types.

Type of Weblog	Characteristics
Tutor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● administered by the instructor● encouraged learners to do reading practice and explore links for self-study.
Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● administered by the entire class● encourages learners to post messages, images and links pertinent to classroom discussion topics
Learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● administered by the learner● encourages individual learners to post their thoughts about the reading

4 Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Weblogs

Weblogs are asserted to have several significant advantages for learning foreign languages [5].

- Weblogs provide an authentic learning environment for real communication. The audience of the writing is not limited to the instructor but extends to classmates and other people beyond the classroom. Weblogs raise students' awareness of audience.
- Weblogs function as online learning logs where learners document their learning experience. Instructors can use this function to record learners' progress and encourage learners to reflect on their learning experience.
- Weblogs enable learners to create social networks and learning communities where they can interact and communicate their ideas and thoughts. This collaboration, learners are motivated to improve their writing skills.

With these advantages, weblogs have been used as a powerful tool to develop writing skills and to provide a practicing environment that enables learners to think, reflect, and communicate with their instructor and peers. Various studies have reported positive effects on the development of learner's writing skills. Using weblogs in foreign language learning classrooms increases student motivation in reading and writing, promotes learner independence and autonomy, and enhances students' analytical and critical thinking skills [6].

While Weblogs show great potential in certain areas of language learning, there are also significant challenges. Students with low English proficiency may experience difficulty in putting their ideas in order. Since weblog writing and peer comments are accessible by anyone, students lacking confidence in their writing ability may feel fear at having others read their thoughts, or those with developmental writing problems may be embarrassed by the possibility that others may see their mistakes. Thus, the students may initially express interest in the idea of blogging, but their opinions can change after learning of the public nature of the activity. These problems suggest that the instructor should take a more active role in assisting students during the blogging [7].

5 Conclusion

Despite the fact that weblogs provide learners with opportunities to work by themselves as well as collaboratively with peers, it is important to note that technology itself does not guarantee better education or automatically make students learn. In order for weblogs to be successfully used to encourage and extend students' learning, teachers need to guide and direct students in their use of the new technology throughout the learning process. It is essential that teachers monitor students' interaction and provide timely intervention. That is, in addition to the attention paid to the process and products of learning, teachers should take part in students' discussion process and give appropriate feedback when necessary respond to queries to help the interactive meaningful dialogues occur.

Web 2.0 environments have great potential for learning, and weblogs have been increasingly implemented in foreign language learning across contexts. Weblogs provide a genuine learning context for learners who have limited opportunities to be exposed to the target language in an authentic environment. Research findings confirm that using weblogs has positive effects on students' writing skills, promoting learner independence and autonomy. Despite these results, many questions remain about how those promises can be realized. More research at using weblogs will be necessary to understand Weblogs better and provide more effective learning environment facilitate learners' collaborative writing processes and interactions. .

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