

Wikilingua.ie: Towards using Web 2.0 Technologies in Language Learning and Teaching

Berit Carmesin, Doris Devilly, Michelle Tooher

National University of Ireland, Galway
Galway, Ireland

E-mail: berit.carmesin@nuigalway.ie, doris.devilly@nuigalway.ie, michelle.tooher@nuigalway.ie

Abstract

Recent years have seen a trend towards the increasing use of Web 2.0 elements in education. Unlike traditional Web 1.0 technologies, these so-called social web applications, e.g. social networks, podcasts, blogs and wikis offer more extensive, outcome-oriented possibilities for communicative language learning. Due to their participatory and interactive potential, they not only foster the students' receptive language skills, but also their productive language skills as well as offering new opportunities for intercultural learning.

Based on these assumptions and our own teaching experiences, the WikiLingua project sets out to build a wiki platform for language teachers, to promote the use of Web 2.0 technologies in language teaching and learning and to provide a forum for collaboration and exchange. In the initial phase of the project, a survey was conducted among 254 language students and 34 third-level language teachers in Ireland. As its main result it shows that, although most teachers use ICT for teaching, they do so mainly for receptive learning aims, as opposed to enhancing the students productive language skills. Correspondingly, while students may use Web 2.0 applications actively in their pastime, most of them do not relate them to effective language learning. These results have informed the planning and focus of WikiLingua.ie, which is still very much a work in progress.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a trend towards the increasing popularity of Web 2.0 [8] applications in education. Commonly, this is attributed to the social nature of these new developments on the Web [1]. Unlike traditional Web 1.0 technologies, social software such as social networks, wikis, blogs and micro-blogging (Twitter, etc.) or virtual reality (VR) environments such as Second Life have opened up new opportunities of interaction and collaboration between teachers and learners as well as amongst learners. As central features of communicative language learning and teaching, interactive and collaborative elements have always been of vital importance in this field, in non-technological face-to-face teaching as well as in blended-learning approaches with early approaches to computer-mediated communication (CMC) manifesting in text chats and e-mail projects [13,15]. What is different about CMC in general and Web 2.0 is the fact that communication in the latter case takes place directly on the Web. This is important because Web browsers are now so ubiquitous and easily accessible to almost anyone, regardless of background and specialist expertise: A learner can, for example, watch a clip from a new foreign language movie, comment on it in the target language in a blog and thereby start a discussion about the movie in a social network with his peers or even beyond the classroom context with native speakers. All this is possible without at any stage having to change tools or technologies: the Web is the platform throughout.

The fact that each user can generate their own content on the Web and practice their "right to communicate" [4] represents another benefit of the Web 2.0 for language learning and teaching, both culturally and linguistically. It is no longer mainly a privilege of the official media to define our perception of culture and the use of language, but we now have access to a vast and constantly growing range of content in form of text, audio and video files on the Web provided by users with different motivations and of different age groups, social, local and linguistic backgrounds. Regardless of how this empowerment of the user is evaluated [6], for language learning and teaching this can only be considered to be beneficial, insofar as it helps to fulfil one of its main aims, namely to enable situations of communication for the learner which are as authentic as possible [18].

These advancements of Web 2.0 in terms of interactive communication, collaboration and user participation open up new potentials for enhancing each of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), as all of the commonly discussed social software applications mentioned

above can be employed both for receptive and productive purposes. As a vital innovation over traditional Web 1.0 technologies, in particular the opportunities provided by Voice over IP (VoIP) applications such as Skype and by wikis, evoke hopeful expectations for effectively fostering oral and written communicative skills [14].

2. Giving Directions to Digital Immigrants

When we initially embarked on the project of using Web 2.0 technologies in our own B.A. and B.Comm. programmes at the National University of Ireland, Galway, we expected to find a wealth of tutorials, directions and examples of best practice on the Web, informing us how to go about doing this and which approaches have proved valuable for language teaching and learning. However, like so many other times searching the expansive Web this information proved difficult to find, often only stumbling upon useful information serendipitously or as a result of spending many hours with Google and del.icio.us. This led to the idea of a meta-site, which would provide all these resources to us and our fellow teachers everywhere. However, discussing this with our colleagues, we received mixed reactions. Some were as excited about the idea as ourselves, but others were more reserved. Those reservations often seemed to be grounded in the fact that the term "Web 2.0", more so than any previous technological advancement, in some diffuse way represents the often cited "digital divide" between the generation of the teachers as the "digital immigrants" and the students as the "digital natives" [10,11] or the new "net generation". [16]

As early as 2001, i.e., in pre-Web 2.0 times, *Prensky* [10] noted that the "average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives" and concludes that they "think and process information fundamentally differently" and therefore call for a change of educational approaches by their "digital immigrant instructors", meaning the then current generation of teachers. *Prensky's* terminology as well as his claims have been taken up and defined further widely in the research literature [2,5,7,11,12], with the interim results of long-term studies of this generation published by *Palfrey/Gasser* [9] and *Tapscott* [17]. According to these studies, Web 2.0 technologies now play a prominent role in the students' life, both in the private, as well as the educational context. This becomes evident for instance in the scenario of multitasking students, sharing information by posting it "to their profiles in social network sites, and talk about it on instant messaging or on blogs". [9]

Not having grown up in this digital environment, teachers embarking on introducing new approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom can find this an intimidating and daunting task. Adding to that a lack of familiarity with the technologies and the feeling of possessing an inadequate skillset, what started out as a promising venture can turn into a classroom nightmare.

In order to get to know our target groups for the Web site better, we decided to conduct a requirements and needs analysis before setting up WikiLingua. Concerning our Irish students, we wanted to find out which of the Web 2.0 technologies typically named in the educational context they are actually using in their spare time, to what extent they are using them both receptively as well as participatorily, and with what motivation. Another question was to find out how, if at all, they were using these technologies, or would find them useful, for language learning. Concerning the teachers (as educational motivators and mediators), we wanted to know to what extent they were using Web 2.0 technologies for language teaching and for what purposes.

2.1 Student Survey

As the initial part of our analysis, we conducted a survey of undergraduate language students from four third-level institutions in Ireland in autumn 2008. In general, the survey showed that, of the 254 students who completed the questionnaire, the average time spent on the internet per day is 2 hours, with more than 50% of participants spending more than 2-4 hours online. This figure combines internet use both at home and at college.

To get a more detailed picture, the students were asked a series of questions to establish which internet, and in particular which Web 2.0 applications they use, and how. The most prominent type of usage is social networking (SN), followed by purely receptive activities such as reading news or gathering general information (e.g., Wikipedia). A total of 84% of the students have a profile on an SN site, 36% of which have a profile on more than one network. As a typical Web 2.0 phenomenon, SN sites combine both receptive and productive internet usage to an equal part: users consume content from their personal network, but they also comment on it and generate content themselves, e.g. in the

form of regular status updates (a form of micro-blogging) or uploads of pictures and movies. In other areas of general usage, however, the survey showed that students mainly consume, rather than produce: 58% read blogs, but only 17% have their own blog. Similarly, most students use Wikipedia, but only a marginal amount actually contribute their own content. Podcasts, as another typical example of the canon of Web 2.0 technologies, do not feature very high on the list of internet activities: Most students (62%) specified that they do not listen to podcasts at all, about a third (34%) listen to them occasionally, and only 4% regularly listen to podcasts through a subscription. Asked to comment on this, many students remarked that they did not know what podcasts were in the first place. Finally, the importance of virtual reality environments for the students is negligible (only 1% have used Second Life).

Regarding the students' use of the internet for language learning, a slim majority, 52%, state that they do use the internet for this purpose on a general level, and consider it a useful tool. Also, most students state that technologies are employed for language learning in university (79%). However, drilling deeper into the details of this kind of usage, we found that, again, students tend to embrace the more receptive possibilities much more than the options for strengthening their productive language skills. This is indicated by the reply to the question on which web sites the students use for language learning purposes - mostly dictionary sites, grammar drills or news in foreign language online newspapers - but also by their replies to the question about which general activities that could be carried out on the internet they would consider potentially useful (see Table 1).

Activity	Type	Abs	%
finding grammar explanations	recep	194	79%
read articles/watch movies/listen to podcasts in the foreign language	recep	191	78%
downloading worksheets	recep	132	54%
e-mail projects/social networking with native speakers	prod	118	48%
blogging in a foreign language	prod	39	16%
producing podcasts in a foreign language	prod	32	13%

Table 1 – Student rating of potentially useful activities on the Web

In general the survey showed that our Irish students seem to embrace the participatory possibilities which Web 2.0 offers mainly in social networks, and mainly in their private, social domain, but not very much outside of it. Other applications such as blogs, podcasts or wikis play a much lesser role. This corroborates the results of a large-scale survey among students in the UK in 2006 by *Bennet/Maton/Kervin* [3], who claim that literature on the “digital natives” in general is mostly based on anecdotal evidence. Furthermore, we found that most students do not relate their Web skills to language learning. This could be explained by the fact that students are motivated to use SN by their peers – i.e., their friends –, but that a similar motivation to use other participatory opportunities outside their social network is missing.

2.2 Teacher Survey

The motivation to use Web 2.0 technologies for the training of productive, rather than receptive language skills, will most likely come from the students' teachers. To get an insight into current practice, we conducted a second survey among 34 language teachers in Ireland. The survey covers a variety of different institutions (4 universities and 4 Institutes of Technologies), teaching experience (from 3-35 years), age groups (27-61 years) and languages. The survey was voluntary and is therefore only representative of those teachers who felt motivated to take part in it in the first place.

Nevertheless, the “digital divide” between natives and immigrants which we noted in earlier discussion is reflected in our survey in how participants of the study assess both their own and their students' confidence in using the internet: 67% of the teachers consider their students to be either confident or very confident in their internet use, while only 50% grant themselves the same level of confidence. Despite this, most teachers in our survey do use the internet and VLEs (Virtual Learning Environment) regularly in preparation (72%) and for class, homework or assessment purposes (71%). While almost all teachers (96%) consider the use of internet technologies in teaching to be a good tool to motivate students, the majority also rate the benefits for receptive skills much higher than for productive skills: 48% and 83% see a benefit for the training of listening and reading skills, respectively, while only 9%

and 30% see a benefit for the training of speaking and writing skills. This tendency to overlook the possibilities of employing the participatory possibilities of the modern Web for the benefit of productive language skills (and a more holistic learning experience) is also borne out by the kinds of websites used by teachers. As shown in Table 2, those kinds of sites that have most potential to be applied productively (blogs, wikis, podcasts, SNs and VR environments) are used much less than sites which have a more receptive character (video and audio files, dictionaries, grammar exercises, etc.).

Site Type	Abs	%
Online research for assignments in class	17	74%
Online dictionaries	17	74%
Watching video files	15	65%
Specific language learning sites	9	39%
Grammar explanations or exercises	9	39%
Listening exercises	9	39%
Blogs	6	26%
Podcasts	6	26%
Wikis	5	22%
Social networks	4	17%
VR environments	4	17%

Table 2 – Teachers: Online activities and Websites used in class, for homework or assessment

Concluding the analysis of the survey, we can surmise that, while today's students are well versed in using various internet and Web applications, their use of participatory elements of the Web is not self-motivated, but instead requires external motivation. In the private, social domain, this motivation is given by their circle of friends, who are present on the same SNs and encourage each other to provide content as a form of communication, rather than only consume it. On the other hand, a similar kind of motivation in language learning is missing, since teachers, who could provide it, although using Web 2.0 technologies to a certain degree for enhancing their students receptive language skills seldom acknowledge the possibilities for the training of productive language skills, and consequently rarely use participatory elements in language teaching. Through the development of WikiLingua.ie we hope to collectively and as a team provide the ideas and support currently lacking among teachers of languages in Ireland and further afield.

3. WikiLingua as a Platform for Collaboration and Exchange

WikiLingua.ie is intended as a support platform for language teachers of all technological abilities – to that end we envisage it to be an unthreatening user-friendly collaborative space, where ideas, resources, best practice, and stories – the good and the bad - can be shared. Developing this space in the form of a wiki was a considered decision; the wiki itself is a Web 2.0 technology and by encouraging participation from the wider network of colleagues nationally and internationally, we hope to start to dispel possible reservations in working with these technologies – consider WikiLingua.ie as your sandbox and let us all play together. We don't mind if you get sand in our eyes, as long as you help us wash it out.

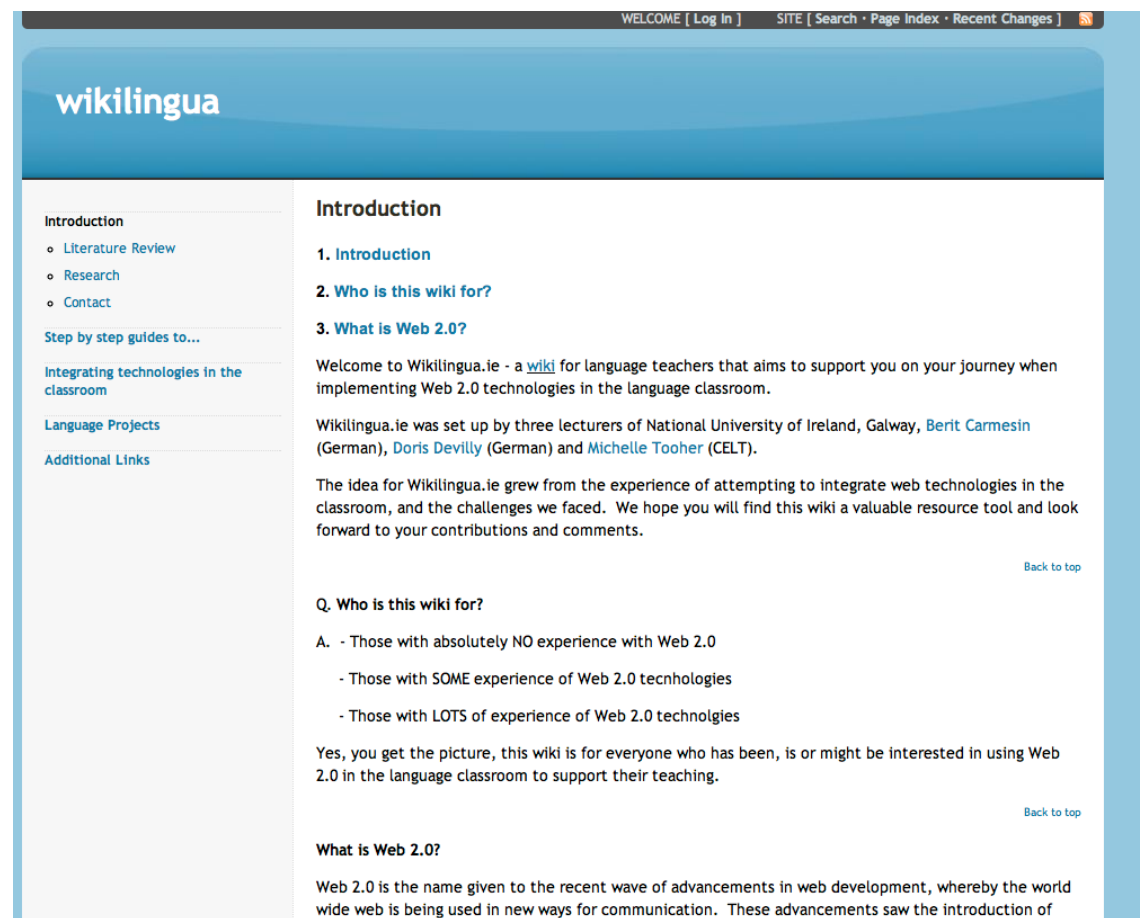
We have argued the potential of Web 2.0 technology for enhancing productive language skills and in the same vein we encourage colleagues to produce, and contribute to this project and to help maintain a dynamic space that is not simply yet another collection of links. The wiki will in the long-term be an open access area that will be open to contributions from the wider language-teacher community and support communication and collaboration within and across languages and sectors (primary to tertiary). The value of the WikiLingua.ie should not be confined to the help guides and ideas, but in the exchange of ideas and advice from colleagues who are facing or have faced similar situations in their own teaching environments – how do we use social networks to encourage participation from our

language class? Or I am trying to engage my students in a collaborative writing task – how might I do that?

Structure of the WikiLingua.ie:

The wiki is composed of 5 main areas:

- An **Introduction** outlining the background to the project and introducing key concepts on Web 2.0 technologies and their potential for use in the classroom;
- **Step-by-step guides** to getting started with some of the free technologies available to you, followed by
- Examples of and suggestions for the **integration of technologies into the classroom**. This will initially be populated with examples gathered from NUIG, but we hope to see this develop as the project continues;
- A **Language Projects** section where colleagues can link to their own projects. In this section we hope colleagues will share stories, and offer hints, tips and suggestions for what to do or perhaps not to do;
- **Additional Links** that may be of interest to colleagues.



The screenshot shows the WikiLingua.ie website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'WELCOME [Log In]', 'SITE [Search · Page Index · Recent Changes]', and a small icon. Below this is a blue header with the 'wikilingua' logo. The main content area is divided into a left sidebar and a main right section. The sidebar contains a table of contents with links for 'Introduction', 'Literature Review', 'Research', 'Contact', 'Step by step guides to...', 'Integrating technologies in the classroom', 'Language Projects', and 'Additional Links'. The main section is titled 'Introduction' and contains three numbered sections: '1. Introduction', '2. Who is this wiki for?', and '3. What is Web 2.0?'. The text under '2. Who is this wiki for?' explains the project's purpose and lists the three lecturers who set it up: Berit Carmesin (German), Doris Devilly (German), and Michelle Tooher (CELT). It also mentions the project's origin in the experience of integrating web technologies in the classroom. The text under '3. What is Web 2.0?' defines Web 2.0 as the name given to recent advancements in web development. There are 'Back to top' links at the end of each section.

Figure 1: WikiLingua.ie

Wikis are by their very nature spaces for collaborative information building and exchange, and WikiLingua.ie *should always* be a 'work-in-progress'. This project is still in its very early stages, and submissions of ideas and interested collaborators are very welcome.

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