Languages, Cultures and Virtual Communities
Les Langues, les Cultures et les Communautés Virtuelles

CALL (computer assisted language learning) wiki

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of the use of new technologies as part of the pedagogy of language teacher training courses. It examines how wikis were used in a computer assisted language learning (CALL) course, which constituted a fourth-year compulsory component of a Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature course. The method of examination used is presented and the data is discussed to establish students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the use of new technologies in their learning, and more specifically the contribution of wiki in their CALL teacher training.

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1. Introduction

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is a field which has been constantly evolving since the early 60s (Warschauer, 1996; Levy, 1997; Delcloque, 2000), in terms of both pedagogical changes and technological advances. For this reason, many teacher training courses (Two-years Master in Computational Linguistics, 2008-2009; Online CALL, 2010; L530 Computer Assisted Language Learning, 2007), which prepare future language teachers inevitably incorporate the use of technologies, not only as part of their subject matter, but also, very importantly, as part of their pedagogy and teacher training approaches.

Adequate training is needed to help understand the pedagogy supporting the use of new technologies in language teaching and learning, and spread good practices to better prepare graduate students for the needs of language teaching. Technological skills and understanding how to employ new technologies to

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successfully support pedagogy are vital for foreign language faculty today (Simon, 2008). The role of language teacher training courses is not, therefore, just teaching what technology is. It also involves evaluating its language teaching and learning potential, locating high quality instructional materials, researching current language educational uses, and sharing findings with language educators.

2. Method

During spring 2009, a CALL course was offered to 11 students as part of their Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature at the University of Nicosia, Cyprus. The student group consisted of:

- three native-like and eight non-native English speakers of advanced level;
- ten students of Greek-Cypriot background and one of Turkish-Cypriot background who had lived in Australia;
- seven female and four male students.

Students had already studied Applied Linguistics, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Basic Computers as prerequisites to this course. In order to give them the opportunity to have first-hand experience with new technologies, and more specifically with Web 2.0 technologies, the design of the whole CALL course started with an eye on the CALL syllabus, in other words what the students needed to know about new technologies and how to use them in language learning, and the other on how to actually give them opportunities to experience such pedagogies through task-based activities during and as part of their training. Wiki was used as the delivery and course management tool. Its use aimed to serve three purposes:

a. to provide students with hands-on experience of the use of new technologies, based on sound second language teaching pedagogies;

b. to enable students to keep a record of their work and their learning for reflection;

c. to give students the opportunity to create a site, where they would have enough online teaching material to get them started in using technology as language teachers, as soon as they get such employment.

Rather than just retrieving information (O’Reilly, 2005; Skiba, 2007), students were expected to create, aggregate and share dynamic content in an emerging social environment (O’Reilly, 2005; Drumgoole, 2006), develop knowledge, critical thinking, skills and experiences in the various aspects of CALL; moreover, students were expected to experience collaborative (Lund, 2008) class and online learning, peer assessment, critical Internet literacy, as well as develop reflective (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005; Chen et al., 2005) and autonomous lifelong learning skills. For these opportunities, wiki was chosen as the central tool of teaching. As part of Web 2.0 technology (Solomon & Schrum, 2007; Bell, 2009), wiki is user-centred and geared towards learner-centred teaching, elements which are central to language teaching and learning.

Wiki was also chosen for the following reasons:

a. it is very easy to use and a very easy tool to introduce as part of Web 2.0 technology;

b. it is free: they can incorporate it in their future teaching, as a course site; their students can create their own and link it to the teacher’s course site.
The wiki concept was introduced at the beginning of the course. Continuous monitoring of the wiki development and the completion of the tasks assigned during the whole course ensured the students completed the course requirements.

All CALL classes were held in the language laboratory. In the beginning, a session was devoted to helping the students set up a wiki, and showing other wikis, including the CALL course wiki, which was developed to serve as a guide to the assignment prompted and to the course work (Papadima-Sophocleous, 2009). This included the following content:

a. the CALL course home;
b. the instructor’s personal page;
c. a weekly tasks webpage;
d. a webpage with students’ photos, names and links to their individual wikis;
e. the instructor’s reflections on the process of the course; these gave guidance and information about what reflective learning and keeping a reflective journal is;
f. a useful tips webpage, where students shared technology knowledge and skills and helped each other;
g. a work in progress webpage for monitoring students’ work and also for students to keep track of their work and compare and improve it on a continuous basis until the final due date;
h. an attendance webpage;
i. a CALL assessment webpage, which provided students with the assessment rubric used to assess them at the end of the course;
j. presentation notes to guide students in preparing the final wiki presentation to the rest of the class.

Students worked for a semester both in the language laboratory and at home. They invited each other to their wikis so that they all had an audience and a forum for exchanging ideas and helping each other. Students regularly discussed each other’s wikis and exchanged ideas and suggestions for improvement. Each student’s wiki constituted a digital portfolio, which contained all students’ work. Assessment was based on the wiki course assessment rubric provided.

During the course, students kept a reflective journal. They recorded the knowledge, skills and experiences they gained from the course and the use of the wiki, and their feelings about them. At the end of the course, each student made their wiki presentation to the rest of the class for a final (self-) evaluation. Finally, students were asked to complete an end-of-course evaluation questionnaire.

The questionnaire data analysis revealed the following:

- no student had ever designed a web page or created a wiki before; only one student had used a wiki;
- all students preferred learning about CALL through the use of technology rather than through traditional learning;
- eight students were very happy with the topics covered and one was a little happy; eight students said there was no topic which they would have preferred not to cover, though one mentioned the annotated review of Internet language learning activities;
- six students said there was no other topic which was not covered which they would have liked to have covered. Three of them however said that, although they were introduced to the use of web quests in language learning, they would have preferred to have the opportunity to design one themselves; this was interesting because students had the option of either creating one or finding more about it and describing some already existing on the Internet, and all students chose the
second option; I believe this was due to too much work and the fact that they did not feel sufficiently confident to explore the area autonomously;

- most students liked the thematic online unit development, wiki and Digital Portfolio awareness;
- students intended to continue using wiki or similar software – five said ‘a lot’, two said ‘much’ and two ‘a little’;
- all students responded that they would continue to use wiki or similar software if they teach;
- five students said they told family and four their friends about their wiki; one of them, a practicing teacher told her students, and two told their colleagues;
- six students said they enjoyed the wiki experience very much, two much and one a little;
- seven students felt the wiki and the use of other related technologies helped them develop awareness, knowledge and skills in using new technologies in TEFL; one said this did not help much;
- six students felt very proud about the wiki they created, two quite proud and one much;
- all students except one preferred wiki based digital portfolios to regular class work and exams.

In their reflective journal and end-of-course self-evaluation, they justified these answers in more details:

- G: You gain more practical experience; it’s more interesting, motivating and fun.
- V: It skips old traditional way of teaching... Technology expands rapidly and we should be aware of this… Moreover, it is an excellent opportunity for people who have never used technology before to learn how to use it.
- As: It helps you learn easier through practicing and learning while you work on your wiki. You can digest easier what is taught.
- M: It is a more motivating and fascinating way for students to complete their work.
- Ei: Not all learners are acquainted with computers and the Internet.
- Aa: It is more interesting and it also inspires students to be more cooperative.
- T: It makes the lesson appealing
- Sa: I can’t see a reason why have an exam since regular class work and practice makes perfect.

The most memorable things students came across on other students’ wikis were the following:

- G: No one thing in particular. It was the first time I had seen other students’ work and that to me was the most interesting thing about others’ wikis.
- Vs: The motivation and the enthusiasm in order to create something different and unique from each other.
- M: The variety of activities they found through their search on the Internet.
- Ea: Many different things, such as the Valentine’s thematic unit and the Halloween one!
- Aa: The Online Test Reviews.
- S: Aa’s voki and V’s several videos embedded in a single video at the same time.

The following are the aspects students liked the most about the wiki digital portfolio assignment:

- G: The Thematic Unit and the collaborative online test comparison.
- V: The Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies. I have learned a lot of things that will be very useful to me as a teacher.
- As: Definitely the web technologies task and the thematic unit planning.
- M: Search on the Internet to find the usefulness of a tool (my tool was the voki) in second language
teaching.
- Ea: Web Technologies, thematic unit planning and reflection (maybe not in every class but certainly after each task).
- Ei: The Annotated Review.
- S: My favourite of all was the online thematic unit development. It is a great way to learn how to plan a lesson in advance and go in class prepared. Furthermore, you can find several activities that your students will learn from and have fun.

On the other hand, students disliked the following. Five students mentioned the annotated review. One of them said, “It was useful but we could spend less time on it”. Another student said that the reason was because they “were assigned to find many activities” and it became “boring”. Another student disliked the theory of the annotated review. Another student found the reflective learning boring for every session. Two students disliked the rubric and two students disliked the collaborative, comparative testing tool review.

Students made the following suggestions for course improvement:
- G: More collaborative work, the use of more Web 2.0 technologies.
- V: I believe the course covered almost everything.
- As: …what we did was sufficient in my opinion; I mean it was quite enough for one semester. Maybe CALL should be expanded to include another course for another semester.
- M: The lecturer can improve her course by excluding some activities of the annotated review part.
- Ea: After each task students could spend more time in the classroom to present the activities they found online; you could also assign them to work together in different groups or pairs each time so to encourage collective work and get them the chance to know each other better and maybe present a better result.

Students were then asked to feel free to add anything else they liked. Although students do not tend to answer such open-ended questions, in this case, there were some students who did:
- V: I enjoyed the course. It was very interesting and beneficial. Besides what I have learned from the course I also learned a few basic skills that a teacher should have…
- As: It was a great course! We learned a lot and we definitely enjoyed it. It will surely help us in our future teaching.
- M: In this course except from learning new things which I am going to use as a future teacher, I had a great time because it is fun working with technology.
- Ea: So far the course was the most interesting and most importantly the most useful one I have attended in the B.A. as it has given me the chance to apply everything I have learnt in my own classes and also get unexpected response from the students!
- Aa: It was a great course and the knowledge I gained through the use of wikis will be very useful later in my career.

From the above data discussion, it is possible to deduce the following points:
- no student had prior experience in designing a web page / wiki before, and only one student had used a wiki;
- all students preferred learning about CALL through the use of technology to more traditional ways;
with the exception of one student who was ‘a little happy’, all students felt very happy with the topics covered;
although many students felt tired with the length of the annotated review, with the exception of one student, none said it was a topic they would have preferred not to cover; instead, they suggested cutting down the number of activities reviewed;
two students mentioned Skype as one technology they would have liked to have covered in class, although this knowledge was shared when each student had to choose a web technology, investigate it and share it with the rest of the students.

As the data in Figure 1 indicates, all students found the wiki very useful, if with a varied degree of usefulness: wiki creation 72.72%; wiki and portfolio awareness and thematic unit 63.63%; Internet search, web 1.0/2.0 and reflective learning 54.54%; annotated review and evaluation rubric 45.45%; and testing tool review 27.27%.

All students said they would continue to use wiki or similar software if they teach; some said they would explore more sophisticated software; three already started using wikis in their teaching.
Most students talked about their wiki to friends and family.
All in all, the whole experience helped them develop awareness of new knowledge, and provided them with skills and experiences in the use of new technologies in TEFL, and an enjoyable learning experience. Moreover, it provided students with experiences in different learning styles (autonomous, collaborative, individual, group and reflective learning) and the opportunity to engage in critical thinking. Their suggestions will be used to improve the course.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the use of wiki in the CALL course provided ample opportunities for students to
develop their knowledge, skills and experiences in the area of computer assisted language learning pedagogy. The use of this web 2.0 technology played an instrumental and central role in that. Students acknowledged this throughout the course, and although, when they became quite competent users of wiki, they acknowledged its limitations and started searching for more improved, similar software, at the same time they acknowledged that because wiki is so easy and simple to use, their initiation to such technology was very quick and smooth. They believed that for the same reasons, it could be an excellent tool to use in their teaching with their students. Three of the students are practicing teachers and have already introduced the use of wikis in their teaching. Moreover, many of the students have started exploring other technologies, already implementing what they started learning throughout this course for autonomous, lifelong learning.

References


