Chapter VI

Skype-Based Tandem Language Learning and Web 2.0

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ABSTRACT

An important aspect of the Web 2.0 phenomenon is the use of Web-embedded and integrated non-browser Internet applications to facilitate community-building and direct user participation and interaction. Social Networking Services, online noticeboards, chat rooms, and other interactive environments enable students to engage directly with native speakers of their target languages. As a way of bringing language learners together, Web 2.0 technologies promise an enormous transformation in language learning. With regard to voice communications specifically, synchronous, peer-to-peer voice-over-IP (P2P VoIP) tools such as Skype, GoogleTalk, and others are an example of a new channel of online interaction that is likely to play an increasingly important role in online community-building and language learning. This chapter analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the Skype service as a tool for tandem language learning. It presents a variety of ways in which Skype’s strengths can be enhanced and its weaknesses overcome by incorporating the exchange into a wider Web 2.0 environment, based on insights we have gained over the course of an ongoing study. In particular, the importance of a task-based approach informed by the principles of tandem learning is emphasized. Preliminary qualitative results are reported of two years of ongoing Skype-based tandem exchanges between Japanese students of English at Tsuda College, Tokyo, and American students of Japanese at San Diego State University. Finally, a prototype is presented for a new dedicated Web 2.0 environment designed to optimize the Skype tandem learning experience and to facilitate further research in the field.
INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at a particular case of an online language-learning environment where human interactions are central to learning. Specifically, the research presented here investigates ways that online voice tandem exchanges using Skype can be best exploited in a class curriculum, and ways that Web 2.0 technologies can enable a community of learners to support the exchanges. Although not a business application, the environment proposed here is fundamentally conceived of as a service to be used by both students and teachers.

An important aspect of the Web 2.0 phenomenon is the use of web-embedded and integrated non-browser Internet applications to facilitate community-building and direct user participation and interaction. Social Networking Sites (SNSs), online noticeboards, chat rooms, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) and other interactive environments have the potential to enable students to engage directly with native speakers of their target languages who are located in remote places. As a way of bringing language learners together, Web 2.0 technologies would indeed appear to promise an enormous transformation in language learning. To the extent that this promise is based upon communicative interaction between language learners and native speakers, past work in tandem language learning is likely to see a resurgence in significance when considered in Web 2.0 contexts, from SNS sites like Facebook to MMORPGs like Second Life. Numerous educators and researchers have noted the potential of tandem interaction in online environments as a language learning tool (Calvert 1992; Brammerts et al. 1989, 1990, 1991; Esch 1996; Little, et al. 1999). In this new era of online accessibility to user-created content and interaction, the question of how best to exploit learner-native speaker interaction for educational purposes becomes more pertinent than ever.

It has always been an uncontroversial assumption that one of the most effective ways of improving second language communication skills is through actual linguistic communication with a native speaker of the target language. In the past, however, access to native speakers has always been limited, and highly dependent on geographical considerations and on which language, exactly, the target language was. The Internet and the World Wide Web provided the foundations upon which a major transformation would occur, and the rise of the Web 2.0 paradigm of user-created content and interaction, and the widespread use of web-embedded peer-to-peer technologies such as text chat and Internet telephone clients have continued to revolutionize accessibility to native speakers of languages spoken in distant places. Perhaps most importantly, Web 2.0 technologies have enabled a wide variety of communicative channels to be brought together to interact with each other and organized in such a way as to be useful in a focused curriculum.

Skype, the free Internet telephone service, is an excellent example of the kinds of Internet technologies that have emerged to foster communication between distantly separated users. Skype’s slogan “the whole world can talk for free” neatly sums up the core service, and the potential benefits to language learners of unrestricted, global conversation, completely free of charge, are self-evident. Nevertheless, technology itself is always a means to an end, and the actual application of these newly available technologies to the challenge of language learning is fraught with pitfalls and challenges. The mere existence of services such as Skype is not enough to benefit language learners in an organized, structured way. For this, thought must be given to how to incorporate the use of Internet voice communication into an educational framework and give students the support they need to make the most of the opportunities that services such as Skype present. Web 2.0 technologies provide the “glue” that enables such a service to be put to its optimal educational
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