Language teaching via weblogs: Exploring new possibilities of teaching Japanese in JSL/JFL contexts

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Abstract

Technology has created additional spaces for language teaching. A recent trend is the application of weblogs to teaching practices. This technology enables teachers to ask how weblogs, which have been primarily used for personal purposes, can be applied to language teaching. In order to accommodate some constraints (e.g. time limitation; a limited use of a target language), language teachers may effectively use technologies. Weblogs have provided new possibilities in FL teaching and the application of the technology provides alternative ways to encourage students to be self-directed. Writing weblogs motivates students to read, write, and conduct research (Oravec, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to explore new possibilities of teaching Japanese via weblogs. This paper first describes the features of weblogs including benefits and issues. It also discusses both positive and negative views of using weblogs illustrating two practical models of weblog-based pedagogy in a JFL (Japanese as Foreign Language) context. Lastly, this paper concludes by discussing the nature of weblogs in language teaching contexts.

Introduction

One of the primary perspectives in teaching a FL is to foster learner autonomy while developing communicative skills. It is a fact that, in many FL learning contexts, there are many students who are motivated to learn a target language but have no idea regarding how to develop their language usage proficiency by themselves.

One way to develop students becoming accustomed to autonomous learning is through technology. Weblogs, which are easy to use and are familiar to young
generations, have provided new possibilities in FL teaching and the use of weblogs offers alternative ways to potentially promote self-directed learners. The production of weblogs motivates students to read, write, and research in class as well as out-of-class (Oravec, 2003).

This paper explores various possibilities in using weblogs in FL teaching, and offers some suggestions for how language teachers can incorporate the technology into their classrooms.

**Features of Weblogs**

The term ‘blog’, which is one of the developing technological tools, is used as a shortened form of ‘weblog’. A weblog, begun in 1999, is hypertext products where people post their ideas and receive comments from other users (Wang & Fang, 2006). Blogging, which is the act of putting articles including personal comments or diaries on a site online and of updating at a regular span, is updated in a linear and time-based way (Jones, 2006) and the newest entries are shown on the top and old postings are pushed down to the bottom of the page. A weblog page consists of the following contents: a title, a short description of the weblog, author’s profile, link, recent articles, recent comments from audience, date and time of the post archival information classified by months, calendar and categories or themes.

There are some reasons the technology has developed. A major reason is the ease of using the technology. In contrast to the production of personal websites, a weblog does not require such specific software as Microsoft Front Page or Publisher on personal computers, nor are special computer skills required. A feature of a weblog is for users to
be able to produce personal pages online with comparably simple operations. Another reason is the cost of using a weblog. Since servers are free owing to being advertisement-driven, everyone can construct his or her own weblog for free or at minimal cost. Therefore, the number of weblog users has been increasing, especially among the young generations.

A weblog provides users with places to exchange their ideas with others. Different from the interaction via email, any users can visit other weblogs and post comments about the entries. The primary use of a weblog is for personal journals, but it can also provide weblog users with opportunities to work together by sharing one weblog. From this viewpoint, a weblog is a powerful resource to collect information along with the function of being able to bookmark not only others’ weblogs but also websites.

**Weblog Use in Educational Settings**

Educators, who use weblogs, suggest various possibilities for teaching practice: learning journals, learning logs or thinking journals, reflective journals, audio learning logs, reflective writing journals, visual learning logs, group discussion and collaborative writing spaces, knowledge management, dialogue for group work, and electronic portfolios (Jones, 2006). Previous studies have reported on the effective use of weblogs in language teaching contexts: ESL writing (Jones, 2006), freshman college composition class (Tryon, 2006), or high-intermediate Japanese language class in the United States (Iida, 2009). In these contexts, weblogs are used to explore ways for students to take responsibility for their own writing (Tryon, 2006; Iida, 2009), and the technology is applicable to individual learning as well as collaborative learning.
Benefits of Using Weblogs

One of the benefits of using weblogs in language teaching is to provide students with additional opportunities to learn a language by extending beyond the concept of time and place. The feature is very important in any FL contexts. A typical feature in these contexts is that there are few opportunities for students to use a target language outside the classroom and they have little need to use the language in their daily lives. In addition, the students are expected to learn the language within a very limited time in a school curriculum. The application of weblogs in teaching practice resolves these two ongoing concerns in FL contexts. As long as students have access to the Internet, they can practice a target language anytime according to their schedule.

Another benefit is that weblogs can provide opportunities for collaborative learning (Wang & Fang, 2006). Collaborative learning starts from the process of posting their work to their own weblogs. This is the basic use of weblogs, but at the same time, it is a very important process in language learning, because posting online offers students many chances to receive feedback not only from classmates but from other weblog users. Creating and updating weblogs allows students to possess a personal context for their postings while developing their interests in blogging from an individual viewpoint and to have discussion with peers or computer-conference with a teacher (Oravec, 2003).

Enabling students to develop reflective approaches to educational genres and maintain knowledge communities is also another benefit (Oravec, 2003). It is true that there is a variety of information which consists of various genres online, and that it may confuse students in their own language learning. However, the learning process of exploring useful weblogs or websites according to their own needs can encourage
students to develop their skills to determine which resources are necessary to use to fulfill their purposes. Additionally, the process can allow students to become aware of critical thinking through reading weblogs constructed by various users who are in professional groups such as politicians, managers, economists, journalists, or news casters. Their weblogs can encourage the students to construct knowledge based on their own fields of interests in terms of future intentions.

**Issues of Using Weblogs**

There are some points educators must consider in using weblogs in classroom settings. The first issue is privacy and the use of anonymity. The use of weblogs doesn’t guarantee any privacy; in other words, every user can easily access any weblogs online. For that reason, students need to gain awareness of privacy issues while using discretion in submitting entries regarding sensitive and personal subjects (Stiler & Philleo, 2003). A resolution for this issue may be the use of anonymity. What educators really want to consider as for the anonymity is to teach students what names they can use online and at the same time, to grasp which students take their different names for weblogs. Using anonymity doesn’t cover all privacy issues, but it is very important for educators to protect students’ privacy in teaching practice.

In addition to the privacy issue, educators need to consider students’ negative feelings such as irritation, confusion, or frustration in their learning process. The fact is that using weblogs can provide additional spaces to study, but students may lose their written materials prior to posting and encounter some occasional technical problems such as the Internet access failure or blog service failure (Stiler & Philleo, 2003). Those
problems impede their learning, and may decrease the degree of motivation. It is, therefore, necessary for educators to be ready to deal with those issues that students may run into in their learning process and to consider how to resolve the problems. Likewise, it is important to prepare alternatives just in case those kinds of technical problems happen.

Being time-consuming and occasionally boring may be another issue in the process of updating weblogs (Oravec, 2003). What students are expected to do in a weblog activity is very limited, and they repeat the same process: to post an article to their own weblogs; to have a discussion; to give comments to peers; to receive feedback from classmates. From this point of view, educators should become sensitive to other possible approaches to use weblogs without being overly dependent on the use of the technology just for one same activity. In addition, it is significant to reflect on how to use the technology effectively within a given time in a school curriculum.

The Application of Weblogs in a JFL context

This section describes how weblogs can be applied to FL teaching, illustrating two different practical models of weblog pedagogy in a JFL context at Indiana University of Pennsylvania: weblog use as a bulletin board; and weblog use as an individual and collaborative learning.

Weblog Use as a Bulletin Board

A primary purpose of using a weblog was to provide students with opportunities to use Japanese outside class to compensate for the lack of class time and the limited
context. The weblog titled ‘I Love Japanese’ <http://japaneselarning.blog121.fc2.com/> was designed for the students who enrolled in Japanese I (beginner level) and III (intermediate level). The weblog was originally constructed for only Japanese III students, but it was used for both classes, because the instructor realized that it offered Japanese III students good opportunities to share their learning experience with not only their classmates but also students who took a different level of Japanese class.

A weblog had been used as a supplemental tool. It was the instructor who managed the weblog. A teacher role was as a coordinator and a facilitator: to create a discussion topic; to monitor students’ discussion; to provide feedback to their postings; and to answer their questions throughout the learning process. The instructor also provided the students with oral feedback during the class, if necessary.

Different topics had been created for both classes in this weblog. A new topic which consisted of some questions in Japanese was added every week and students were expected to post their answers. Likewise, a topic regarding students’ learning styles and negative feelings in language learning (e.g. irritation, anxiety, or confusion) had created to exchange their experience with their classmates.

While working on this weblog activity, the instructor had encountered a few problems. The first problem is, as Oravec (2003) pointed out, the necessity to spend much time on explaining how to use a weblog. It was indispensable for the students to download free software of Japanese typing system while understanding how to post their entries, because most of them didn’t have any Japanese typing software in their personal computers. It was also necessary for the instructor to explain vocabulary used on the
weblog, because the one designed by a Japanese company was used for this activity. Therefore, the instructor had to explain every vocabulary item students didn’t understand.

The second problem is the difficulty in maintaining the conversation between the instructor and the students. Wang and Fang (2006) emphasized the significance of collaboration between a teacher and students in using weblogs, but the use of weblog in this JFL context indicated that most of the students were inclined not to submit entries once they finished posting. As a result, the interaction on the weblog had been conducted as followed: instructor’s posting (a discussion topic), students’ submission of comments (response), and teachers’ feedback to those comments. What is worse, any interaction among the students did not happen. Reflecting on this result, one point the instructor must consider is how to motivate students to interact with each other.

These findings in this study mirror the previous studies, especially providing additional opportunities to study a target language by going beyond the notion of time and place. The use of a weblog in this JFL context is very simple and this is just one example in teaching practice. However, this study indicates that the application of a weblog is effective in terms of enabling students to use the target language out-of-class, but at the same time, it reveals some implications language teachers must consider in FL contexts: time involvement; students’ motivation; and some possible problems and resolutions. In order to make better use of weblogs in language teaching context, it is crucial to rethink how language teachers can get students to be more engaged in a weblog activity and how they can increase the interaction between an instructor and the students.
Weblog Use as an Individual and Collaborative Learning

This weblog use was a part of Iida’s (2009) case study which examined the relationship between blogging and developing learner autonomy in a JFL context. Weblogs were used for each student’s individual learning activity in a course, CRLG 258: Japanese IV (high-intermediate level). This activity was situated as journal entries throughout a semester. Students were required to: post their journal entries to their weblog every week (e.g. some students kept diaries of what they had done in a week or what they were going to do in summer vacation; others wrote new Japanese expressions or new grammar structures which they studied through their Japanese conversation partners or through some Japanese learning websites.); visit peers’ weblogs and read their entries; and leave comments in assigned groups out-of-class. The purpose of using weblogs, therefore, was for students to become more self-directed and to increase their social interaction.

At the beginning of the semester, each student constructed his or her individual weblog by employing a free service available online <http://wordpress.com>. The instructor also created his own weblog <http://iidaatsushi.wordpress.com/> to share general information, and every student’s weblog was linked with his. As a result, both the instructor and students could go back and forth to each others’ weblogs.

This study reported on both positive and negative outcomes of using weblogs in this JFL context. A weblog-based journal, in general, positively influences students’ Japanese learning. For instance, students seemed to prefer a weblog-based journal to a paper journal for the following reasons: using weblogs allowed students to link media (e.g. pictures, music, videos, etc…) to their Japanese learning; it enabled them to visit
and read peers’ weblogs; and it provided easier access to study Japanese (e.g. they didn’t have to bring some textbooks or dictionaries everyday; instead, they can access many web-sources by just sitting in front of the desktop and logging on to the computer).

Students believed that these features of the technology developed their motivation to study Japanese out-of-class, and encouraged them to be autonomous. Another positive perspective is that reading peer weblogs was beneficial to develop their Japanese skills. Students were inclined to consider that reading their classmates’ weblogs enabled them to share opinions, to gain a greater awareness of grammar by reading peer’s entries, and more importantly, to find out a lot of interesting resources or useful examples on their weblogs. In this way, the application of weblogs was effective in this JFL context, not simply because it provided additional opportunities to study the language, but because it facilitated students’ self-directed learning.

In contrast, there were some negative comments for using weblogs. While collaboration between an instructor and learners seemed to be important, students felt feedback from their classmates was not so useful to improve their language skills. At first, students did not know how to give feedback. Second, such comments as ‘I like your entry’ or ‘Your entries are really useful’ were not helpful. Third, few students responded to peer weblogs from grammatical and pragmatic viewpoints. In addition, it seemed to be difficult for students to comment on peer’s weblogs if their entries didn’t have anything interesting to share.

This study reveals that collaboration was a prerequisite to encourage students to be more self-directed (Lee, 1998), but they were not motivated to engage in peer response if doing so was difficult or not relevant to achieving their personal goals. Regardless of
whether students gave and received comments on their weblogs, however, most of the students believed that collaboration was the key for their success in Japanese learning, more specifically being a member of the online community.

Further research needs to be conducted regarding how successfully collaboration among learners works in order to better use weblogs. This study reveals that collaboration was an important approach in FL learning, but learners needed to know how to work on peer review. From this viewpoint, learner training on how to give feedback may be necessary for successful collaboration. Thus perhaps FL teachers should train students on how to provide feedback and what kinds of comments are effective.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored new possibilities in using weblogs in JSL or JFL contexts and describes how the technology can be applicable to teaching practices to encourage students to be more self-directed. It also mentions both benefits and issues of applying weblogs to second or foreign language teaching contexts and offers some suggestions to use the technology for the educational purposes.

This paper also illustrates two practical models in a JFL context in the United States and discusses better use of weblogs in this specific classroom setting reflecting on both positive and negative outcomes gained through the two case studies. This paper supports that using weblogs positively affects student perceptions of language learning. More specifically, weblog-based individual learning can help students become self-directed, and reading peer weblogs in particular motivates students to learn Japanese. In
this way, the application of weblogs provides students with opportunities to reflect on their learning styles, which is essential to facilitating autonomous learning. Likewise, collaboration between instructor and students helps students develop language proficiency. From this viewpoint, the nature of weblogs in language teaching contexts is “a reflective conversational tool for self-organized learning” (Fiedler, 2003, p. 1).

Weblogs open up new possibilities in language teaching and create additional spaces to teach a target language by going beyond the classroom context. There are some points which language teachers must consider (e.g. time devotion, students’ privacy, the Internet access, etc…), but it is nevertheless worth using the technology as an efficient way to promote autonomous learning in educational settings.
References


