

The use of Web 2.0 tools to promote learner autonomy

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Introduction

When the Learner Technology worm set out on its journey from The United Arab Emirates (see Vance Stevens' piece in *Independence* 42) to join us here at Simon Bolivar University in Caracas, we were sure that it knew the tremendous challenge that lay ahead. But our worm braved the stormy weather, the sometimes rough seas that threatened to overpower and crush it and endured the long and perhaps solitary journey from the Middle East to South America. It never looked back, but forged ahead, so that when it finally wriggled itself onto our doorstep, its worn and tired face glowed with a sense of satisfaction, of achievement, of having overcome the obstacles, of having attained its goal.

The worm's journey symbolises that of our students, English as a Foreign Language learners, who strive to learn the target language in a cultural environment in which authentic input is limited and in an academic context where communication stems more from activities imposed by the teacher than the need to understand and produce the target language in their subject areas, as would be the case in an English as a Second Language setting. External pressures at the university also reduce the already limited number of contact hours students have with the language. While some have been fortunate to have had a solid grounding in English during their primary and secondary education, many have not. Poor grammar and a deficient vocabulary which impedes their understanding of academic texts often lead to low self esteem and frustration, rough seas which threaten to overpower and crush their desire to learn! Yet the desire is there, because in an ever increasingly complex world in which physical boundaries are being eroded and information is constantly exchanged, a good command of English is the key, not only to their immediate academic success, but to their future professional careers. So, like our worm, these students must also travel the long and solitary road towards their goal, and we, their teachers, must help equip them with the tools and resources needed to survive this journey and reach their objective.

Setting the stage

When some people think of autonomous learning and learning with technology, the picture that might come to mind is that of a student working in isolation, and when they see our students in the computer lab, the scene might just confirm their hypothesis. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paradoxically, for us, autonomy and technology suggest communication and union and not separation and isolation. To find our own concept of autonomy, which would give us insight into what we wanted to promote in our students, we had to ask ourselves the following questions: What is autonomous learning? Who is an autonomous learner? Holec's classic definition of autonomy states that it is "...the ability to take charge of one's own learning...[which] ...is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning" (1981, in Benson, 2001:48). This might appear to mean the handing over of control and responsibility from the teacher to the student, and one might be tempted to ask how realistic this can be within the constraints of conventional education. Dam (2000) looks at this and defines autonomous learning as that which takes place in an environment created by the teacher, in which the learner is given the possibility to be consciously and actively involved in his or her own learning. Little (1991) also notes that student autonomy does not exclude the teacher's input, or remove his/her responsibility from the learning process. So, we can then consider it to involve a change in the student and teacher roles to the point where both work together for the benefit of the learner. Finally, we asked ourselves, "What are the characteristics of an autonomous learner? What special traits should he/she have?". Breen and Mann (1997) have stated that autonomous learners should possess a desire to learn, have a positive self-image along with metacognitive capacity and the ability to handle change and to negotiate with others. They are also independent learners who can make strategic use of the learning environment. So, in autonomous learning, far from removing ourselves from the teaching context, we, as facilitators, can help students become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, their individual learning styles, help them to develop learning strategies, to reflect on their own learning and devise plans for future action. In this way, students may be more likely to develop this facet of autonomy which Little defines

as a capacity, "...for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (1991:4).

Another aspect that we considered important was to see where autonomy fits into the theory of learning and the theory of language that are the cornerstones of our teaching. We depart from the premise that the reason for learning a language is to communicate for a purpose which is relevant and meaningful to both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader and that learning, in general, is a social and cognitive phenomenon that is constructed by each individual through interaction and collaboration in the negotiation of meaning. Therefore, interaction and collaboration should be considered as prime factors in promoting the learning of a language, and the more input students have in this process, the stronger and the more effective learning should be. Added to this, we also believe that students should have enough confidence in their own potential as language learners to start this communicative process. So, our role as language educators is to foster students' own potential in order to make them ready to communicate in the foreign language and our first main task is to promote or enhance student autonomy.

We then looked at the role of learning technologies in education and asked ourselves "How can this field help us promote autonomy in our learners?" Computer Assisted Language Learning has strongly related to autonomous learning since its inception (see Benson, 2001), and Warschauer's and Healey's (1998) division of the history of CALL into three phases: behaviouristic, communicative and integrative seems to reflect the language teaching methodologies in vogue at the time. Computers have been used to drill and test discrete grammar and vocabulary items; for text reconstruction and problem solving activities; and, more recently, in the use of multimedia where audio, video and text are combined to create a richer, more varied sensorial environment which allows students to explore language and content in ways unknown in the past. In all three phases, learners have had some sort of control over the delivery of the content, with more interaction being achieved as developments in computer technology advanced. Yet Benson (2001), while acknowledging that collaborative learning and increased learner control over interaction are possible through the Internet, raises two important questions. The first, asked by Kenning (1996, in Benson, 2001) deals with the attitudes, skills and strategies that students must have if they are to benefit from electronic tools and resources. The second, and perhaps the more important for us, questions the effectiveness of technology-based approaches in the development of skills associated with autonomy. As Benson writes, "a great deal depends on the ways in which technologies are

made available to the learners and the kinds of interaction that take place around them..." (p. 140).

In our experience of delivering blended EFL courses since 2002, we have faced these two issues and have found that students do develop the necessary skills to work with technological tools and that the use of technology can, indeed, foster learner autonomy. We also believe that Web 2.0 tools used in a coherent student-centred syllabus, with active student participation, is the best medium to achieve this aim.

What are Web 2.0 tools?

Web 2.0 emerged as a result of the need to communicate, to interact. O'Reilly (2005) coined the term to refer to web-based technology that facilitates and promotes communication and sharing among users worldwide. Blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds, aggregators, social bookmarks, among others, are concepts ingrained in this new approach to global interaction that has been rapidly adopted by the e-learning community.

Why use Web 2.0 tools?

Negotiation of meaning is a must for language learning to take place, and this is only possible when there is interaction through real communication. As we have stated above, students need to be exposed to the Englishes of the world to be able to communicate effectively with native and non-native speakers of the language around the globe. Web 2.0 tools facilitate both processes by allowing access to varied input and interaction using the four skills of the language (reading, writing, listening and speaking). While wikis, forums and blogs provide opportunities for reading and writing, podcasts, videos, vlogs, webcasts, and screencasts, among others, give access to spoken language.

Authentic resources, those that have not been created for language teaching, are difficult to find in most EFL settings. Now they are available online with just a click of the mouse. Theme-based articles, news and books can be found in written and spoken form, and even through videos. Teachers that belong to online communities of practice can have access to guest speakers and other students, increasing the opportunities for authentic interaction both synchronously (in real time) or asynchronously (delayed time).

Another crucial element in teaching is that of students' individual learning styles. Incorporating resources to carry out activities that cater to our students varied cognitive needs is a very difficult task in a face-to-face (f2f) course. With Web 2.0 tools this is much easier.

The easy integration, through embedding, of different voice /video / graphic applications in wikis and blogs is another asset that is making Web 2.0 almost indispensable in EFL e-course design.

There are enormous advantages for teachers in terms of materials development in the use of Web 2.0 tools:

- Since most Web 2.0 tools are web-based, teachers do not need to have a server to host their resources.
- These tools are user-friendly and most offer video tutorials; so, teachers can create their own material without waiting for the school instructional designer to first understand their ideas and finally convert them into a product.
- Most of these tools can be edited from any computer connected to the Internet. Teachers can add, edit and delete information even during class time.
- There are plenty of free Web tools to create the resources needed for almost every activity, at any level of instruction. Ready-made materials that can be adapted or adopted for specific contexts are also available online.

Once a course or a lesson has been designed and made available on the Web, it can be recycled for future courses as is, or with the corresponding changes derived from course evaluations carried out by teacher and students:

- They learn how to use these tools for academic purposes and, at the same time, can transfer their use to their personal lives and future professional careers.
- They can practice the target language with native and non-native speakers worldwide.
- They have access to updated information in their areas of interest in different formats.
- RSS feeds allow students to get all the desired information on one page.
- [MP3](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mp3) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mp3>) and [MP4](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MP4) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MP4>) formats allow students to download videos and recordings to be later accessed offline from players, CDs, or the hard disk of their computers.
- Students learn to be autonomous in their learning process.

How do Web 2.0 tools make students more autonomous?

A student-centred syllabus, containing objectives stated in terms of student performance; meaningful activities designed taking into consideration students' interests, needs and learning styles; step-by-step lesson plans and a clear evaluation system constitute, together, the first step to promoting autonomy in learning. The next step is having all this information available to students from the first day of classes. This is possible through wikis or blogs. (For an example of a course wiki, see: <http://id3-124dg.pbwiki.com/>.)

When students have all this information at hand, they can access their courses at any time, and complete their activities at their own pace. This flexibility will require students to make use of metacognitive strategies in order to set their own objectives, distribute their time, and evaluate their own performance in completing the assigned tasks. In this way, students become responsible for their own learning. As one of our students says:

The methodology that the presence of the teacher in the classroom is not essential is very good because it helps strengthen the sense of responsibility that we have as future professionals.

In educational settings that foster learner autonomy, the teacher is the last resource students go to when they have a question. When students have a problem and the solution can't be found by looking at the instructions in the lesson plan, tutorials or information on the web, they ask a classmate. They become independent learners able to learn from, and with their peers, making use of the resources at their disposal.

Group and pair work are fundamental for students to learn to collaborate, share, and learn from each other. Group work is the natural medium for negotiation and is one of the traits of an autonomous learner (Breen & Mann, 1997). Synchronous (Yahoo Messenger, Skype) and asynchronous (forums) tools help students get together to do their work from different venues. Chatlogs can be saved to share with other groups, and for teachers to observe the learning process involved in the discussions. (For an example -- a group chat on modernism in Valencia - see:

http://slrubena.com/english4.Chat_Valencia_modernism.htm)

Applications such as VoiceThread (<http://www.voicethread.com/>), Springdoo (<http://www.springdoo.com>), and Splashcast (<http://www.splashcast.net>), among others, allow students to create group oral presentations with the help of images, which can then be embedded into their own wikis or blogs for the teacher, classmates and friends to comment on. In our case, we usually have people, native and

non-native speakers, from other countries interact with our students in different ways; e.g. as guest speakers, an audience for oral presentations given live online, or by writing comments about students' work. Knowing that their work is being heard and read by other people also helps increase students' sense of self-worth.

In order to help students with their pronunciation, there are different text-to-speech (TTS) applications into which students introduce their text. They can then listen to the spoken text as many times as they want (see Gonzalez, 2007). With the help of these applications, students no longer need to rely on the presence of the teacher to correct their pronunciation. In fact, they learn to listen closely to the automated text and to detect the differences in their own pronunciation. (For an example of Urban planning working TTS, see:

<http://engb.springdoo.com/public/play/?id=M1F9724CF0FBD30C3E>). For a student's end of term presentation on Sustainable design, see:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7achgG5_IU)

Finally, there are also applications that can be used to create stand-alone materials. Exercise generators like Hot potatoes (<http://hotpot.uvic.ca>), ClassMarker (<http://www.classmarker.com>) and Script-O

(<http://www.readingmatrix.com/quizmaker>) create a variety of different interactive exercises which appeal to different learning styles. Crossword puzzles, cloze, drag and drop and matching exercises, single and multiple selections, True and False or open ended questions can be created with different levels of difficulty, so students can choose the areas they need to work with and study at their own leisure. A number of items can be created and the software can be programmed to load a certain quantity each time the student accesses the page. In this way, there is a constant recycling of the material. These activities can help students practice discrete grammar or vocabulary items or check on listening and reading comprehension. They can be made more interesting by the inclusion of links to video and audio files and by the uploading of images and texts. Feedback can also be included so that students are given clues to help them arrive at the correct answer. There is discovery in the learning process. Explanations can also be included as part of the feedback so the teaching component is also present.

Students can also create their own online activities using, for example, crossword puzzle generators whereby they can upload the vocabulary they are learning along with the clues and use the puzzles as a resource for reviewing vocabulary and content. Other vocabulary generators allow them to not only upload their own vocabulary, but also to create a number of different, interactive vocabulary exercises, so that there is variety in learning.

Students can then share their activities with each other. (For an example of a reading class with activities designed using an exercise generator, see http://assignments07.pbwiki.com/Becoming_human) For an example of a site created with Web 2.0 applications for interactive vocabulary exercises, see <http://vocabularyusb.pbwiki.com>. For an example of quiz created by a student, see: <http://www.readingmatrix.com/quizmaker/classes/?id=2130>).

These are but some of the ways in which Web 2.0 tools can help to make our students autonomous and our work more rewarding. These applications give students control over the content and the pace of their learning and this, in the long run, helps create a positive image of their learning potential. They become more self-motivated and responsible and we believe that this, ultimately, leads to more effective learning.

Conclusion

Since integrating technology into our classes in 2002, we have seen a steady increase in our learners' willingness to participate actively in their own learning process. The change did not come overnight because we still live in a very teacher-centered society where students are not used to having a say in the content that is taught, the evaluation system or even reflecting on and evaluating their own work. It was important to make students aware of who they were, what they knew and how they could cut the "apron strings" which held them fast to their teachers. By making them aware of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies available to them, we were, in fact, starting them off on the road to attaining their independence. The use of information technology, and especially Web 2.0 tools, was essential in maintaining contact, that bond between us that let our students know that support was only a click away, and at the same time giving them a sense of freedom to work on the areas of their learning that they considered important. These tools also promote authentic communication in an environment where this input is scarce and at the same time helps prepare them for the technological work place of the future. Five years on, and our end of term surveys tell stories of students whose self esteem has grown, who are capable of making decisions with regard to their own learning, setting their own goals and working toward achieving them. Like our worm, they end their English course with a sense of satisfaction, of achievement, of having overcome the obstacles, of having attained their goals. Like our worm, they now possess the qualities needed to continue their journey:

I think that the no-presence class is a very good option for this type of

courses. Our schedule is very tight and this type of classes gives you the opportunity to learn at home. I also think that mostly in this trimester there were many different types of activities so I didn't get bored with them, I really enjoyed one particular activity: the one about modernism where we did our own quizzes, that was a very good way to involucrate us in our evaluating process. (Quoted from one of our students)

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