Interactive Web 2.0 Technology in L2 Writing Classrooms

Zeinab Nasser Safieddine

American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to review current research on the use of web 2.0 interactive tools in second language (L2) writing classrooms. Research shows that web 2.0 interactive tools are starting to find their way into almost all pedagogical practices in L2 classrooms, especially writing. This review discusses how wikis, blogs, social bookmarking, micro-blogging, and social networking are recognized as interactive tools that help L2 learners in collaboratively developing their various writing assignments. The review also indicates that regardless of their important role in writing classrooms, these interactive tools might have serious drawbacks that require teachers' attention to ensure that they are not negatively interfering with the learning and teaching process. Finally, this review highlights important issues that teachers need to consider if they plan to use web 2.0 tools in their classrooms.

Keywords: web 2.0, wikis, blogs, social bookmarking, social networking, micro-blogging, L2, writing

1.   Introduction

Net generation students have grown up with technology dominating every aspect of their lives. Computers, Internet, iPads, and smart phones are some technological devices that are necessities for these students. Technology is woven into their lives. These students will start their day by sending messages greeting their friends, replying to emails, downloading their assignments and lectures, posting comments on their Facebook walls, tweeting, and sending their assignments through emails or posting them on the blackboard system. Briefly, these students are net savvy and digitally literate. As Warschauer and Grimes (2007) point out, "[m]illions of people now interact through blogs, collaborate through wikis, play multiplayer games, publish podcasts and video, build relationships through social network sites, and evaluate all the above forms of communication through feedback and ranking mechanisms" (p. 1). For a long time, technology has been integrated into classrooms to aid students in learning. Overhead projectors, LCDS, interactive boards, and computers have been used by several teachers to illustrate and explain new concepts. However, implementing technology in classrooms these days is taking a different angle. Being in a highly technologically based economy and dealing with savvy net users, teachers are now concerned with interactive technological tools, the computer applications and social media that require learners to be active readers and writers.

Wikis, blogs, micro-blogging, social bookmarking, and social networking (Facebook), or what is referred to as web 2.0, are some of the interactive or social media Internet technologies that are finding their ways into pedagogical practices in L2 writing classrooms. Several teachers have begun to experiment with the use of these tools in their writing classrooms. MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) mention that these tools "facilitate interaction, collaboration, and sharing online" (p. 46). I believe that one of the dispositions required from the net generation students is the ability to work in a team. Besides, since writing is a means of communication that requires a common discourse between readers and writers, these web 2.0 tools enable writers to share, communicate, express, and illustrate their ideas easily through writing. Actually, Kessler, Bikowski, and Boggs (2012) mention that collaborative writing "contribut[ed] to a higher quality of learning…increased pooling of knowledge [in the writing process], increased students motivation…and attention to discourse structure as well as grammar and vocabulary usage" (p.92). Storch (2011) adds that collaborative writing fosters students' reflective thinking.

E-mail: zeinabsafieddine@gmail.com

Using these tools, writers get the chance to incorporate "audiovisual features, organize text nonlinearly through links to other texts, and easily revise (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010, p. 46). So, through posting their writings, receiving comments from their readers, and then revising, I believe that L2 learners, by using these interactive tools, understand that writing is a social practice. In fact, written texts should be visited several times to ensure that the outcome matches one's expectations. The act of composing requires an ongoing process of pre-drafting, drafting, and revising. I think these tools can help L2 writers understand that writing is an evolving recursive process. Besides, web 2.0 will force them, to a certain degree, to seriously consider the role of the audience when writing. If an unclear text is posted, writers will receive comments asking for clarification. This is highly important because L2 writers' attention will be directed toward meaning when they are aware of their audiences. However, regardless of their important role in developing L2 students' writing accuracies, MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) postulate that, the use of these interactive tools raises serious concerns about students' safety and privacy and the possible effects that they might have on students' writings.

The following parts will examine how each of the wikis, blogs, micro-blogging, social bookmarking, and social networking (Facebook) can be used in writing classrooms to improve L2 students' writings. Also, the forthcoming sections will discuss some of the concerns that might arise in classrooms as the result of using these web 2.0 tools, and how teachers can overcome these worries.

2. Wikis

Wikis are "digital spaces where authors can post thoughts, ideas, questions, and other forms of communication" (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010, p. 56). An example of a wiki is Wikipedia. In wikis, a group of authors work collaboratively on a single project. All writers get the chance to add, delete and revise the written information (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010; Storch, 2011). Wikis, according to Warschauer and Grimes (2007), "are empowering collaborative multiauthored writing to better harness collective knowledge" (p. 16). In a study conducted by Li, Chu, Ki, and Woo (2012), where 59 students had to compose essays collaboratively in Chinese using a wiki, results revealed that the participants perceived that working collaboratively "was beneficial in boosting writing motivation, increasing group interactions, and extending the audience for their writing" (p. 159). An important aspect of wikis is that it saves the edits (Shu &Chuang, 2010). So, for the same writing project, writers can always go back to the previous versions in order to compare the work and see how it developed. I believe that this aspect, preserving the edits of the wikis, is highly important for teachers because it allows them to trace how students developed their writing project and how they went over the process of drafting, editing, and revising their work. It also permits teachers to trace the effort that students exert to perform the given task.

Importantly, wikis draw students' attention to the role of revising, which is a neglected aspect in writing classrooms (MacArthur &Karchmer-Klein, 2010),. In a study conducted by Kost (2011), eight students enrolled in German language classes in their 4th and 6th semester participated in a collaborative essay writing using a wiki. Kost (2011) found that when writing collaboratively using a wiki, students used various strategies "during the pre-writing phase, strategies for adding or changing content, and strategies to make revisions" (p. 611). For example, students collaboratively engaged in discussing the ideas that should be incorporated in the text, how they are progressing in the work, and which ideas require further clarification. In addition, the participants, through a questionnaire, responded that the use of a wiki for a writing project was a positive experience, which had a "positive effect on scheduling and workload" (p. 614). Further, the participants were "able to identify and correct errors even if they have limited proficiency" (p. 616).

Regardless of the positive impact that wikis have on education in terms of giving students the chance to work collaboratively, encouraging them to revise their work, and allowing them to develop their writings gradually, wikis might have some drawbacks that require teachers' attention. In the study conducted by Kost (2011), ownership appeared to be a serious problem among participants. So, I believe, as MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) mention, teachers should guarantee ownership or authorship by distributing different responsibilities to different students in the group. For example, the teacher can divide the work among

students based on their interest, while also ensuring that they are working collaboratively on all parts, that is each member in the group is expected to contribute to all the parts of the writing assignment. This will allow students to work together in a responsible atmosphere. Further, when it comes to evaluation, teachers should consider the effort each student has put in the part that is of his/her responsibility and the overall collaborative work done by the group.

Teachers should make sure that the wikis are accessed only by the group members (Gokcearslan & Ozcan, 2011; MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010). If the wikis are made public from the very beginning, any online user can enter the page and make changes. This will be a serious problem because teachers won't be able to track the changes made by students. I think teachers should keep it private throughout the course, only giving students the chance to publish it publicly at the end of the course. Here again, I believe students will be prepared to deal with authentic audiences. They will live the experience of publishing their work online and sharing it with people worldwide. Further, in the study conducted by Kost (2011), some students were reluctant in editing each other's work although they were required to do so. Thus, teachers should create a learning environment that encourages students to seek help and appreciate it when provided by their colleagues. Throughout the course work, teachers can give students the chance to peer-edit each other's work. Not only will this enhance their own self-regulation and writing skills, but it will also teach them to show respect to their peers' ideas and provide them with constructive feedback. Accordingly, when asked to work in groups on a writing task using a wiki, students will not feel hesitant to provide each other with feedback.

3. Blogs

Blogs or weblogs are websites created by a single author to communicate his/her thoughts, ideas, opinions, and experiences. As in wikis, blogs allow users to integrate images, videos, and links to other websites. There is a comment section for readers to respond on what is posted (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010; Rahmany, Sadeghi, & Faramarzi, 2013). Blogs can be created by teachers or students for different purposes. As for teachers, according to MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010), they can create blogs to share their various educational experiences or to share classroom news with their students. For students, blogs can be recognized as online reflective journals. Through these blogs, students can be taught that written language can be creative and expressive. Students can be asked, from the beginning of the semester, to create a blog in which they have to post a written text tackling any issue or topic of their choice. Also, teachers can sometimes provide students with a stimuli- a poem or an image- and ask them to respond to it. Classmates are expected to comment on each other's posts.

Blogs can be implemented in writing classrooms to enhance L2 students' writing abilities. It is a means to help learners improve their language skills, express themselves freely, and experience an ongoing textual collaboration, which encourages them to write freely and openly through sharing their ideas. In fact, Chang and Sun (2012) indicate that expressing "encourages fluency, personal writings, and development of writers' voices." Also, through posting and receiving comments and feedback from peers, learners, as Kessler et al. (2012) mention, "tend to communicate online in unpredictable ways…focus on meaning rather than form…demonstrate improved fluency and accuracy…and value the opportunity to share feedback with friends" (p.93). In the study conducted by Chang and Sun (2012), seven EFL students participated to see how blogs help students "process academic writing knowledge and make sense of their writer identity." The results of the study revealed that using blogs "not only encourages students to actively and reflectively engage in knowledge sharing, knowledge generation, and the development of numerous strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the learning process" but also students had the sense of authorship.

In another study conducted by Mansor (2011), students had to publish their reflective journal on the web in the form of a blog. Mansor found out that students highly enjoyed the experience, and the use of blogs through sharing and giving each other feedback increased students' reflectivity. In addition, Rahmany et al. (2013) mention that blogs increases vocabulary enhancement and structural accuracy when writing. The results of their study, where twenty-five students participated in writing blogs over a period of five weeks, showed that students had positive attitudes toward the use of blogs. Actually, 60% of the students

"felt confident to use weblog as a tool to express themselves freely…. [Also,] 70% [of them] believed that blogging has improved their writing abilities" (p. 1293). Further, the results revealed that "the number of grammatical errors has decreased dramatically during the peer feedback" (p. 1287).

Nevertheless, blogs aren't free of problems. Teachers, as MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) indicate, have to take several issues into consideration when planning to use blogs in writing classrooms. Blogs are available for everybody online, so issues of safety and appropriate material arise. Also, this publicity will raise concerns about who will read and post for the blog and how the interaction between the writer and the commenter will evolve. Accordingly, blogs can't be open to the public unless the teacher approves. Further, these blogs can be password protected with teacher/students access only. Furthermore, teachers can use a blogging system that gives them the chance to review every thing (students' writings and comments) before being posted (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010).

4. Micro-Blogging

As defined by MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010), micro-blogging "also known as social messaging, is a way of communicating short, immediate statements to others" (p. 60). Twitter is the most popular micro-blogging service with more than 200 million users, who send around 100 million tweets per day (Hattem, 2012). Originally, Twitter has originated in response to the question "What are you doing" (Borau, Ullrich, Feng, Shen, 2009; MacArthur &Karchmer-Klein, 2010). Users can add a message that is up to 140 characters; this is equivalent to 30 words. The fact that only 30 words can be written at a time was a reason to attack the use of Twitter in classrooms. For example, Sirucek (2009) mentions that "Twitter is where 'grammar comes to die'" (as cited in Hattem, 2012, p. 38). This might be true to a certain extent because when we usually send messages we try to use a simplified language, which can be grammatically incorrect. For example, a message might look something like: plz txt if done wiz class. Me waitin. Lots db8 u missed. The fact that there is a limited number of words per entry obliges the users to sacrifice language.

However, in a study conducted by Newgarden (2009), where intensive ESL students and their teacher were required to post three tweets per week describing their activities outside the classroom, Twitter was found to be a useful tool in classroom. Newgarden (2009) found that the use of Twitter helped students in building a classroom community. Students demonstrated high levels of concern and support for each other. Also, in another study conducted by Antenos-Conforti (2009), where Twitter was used among intermediate university-level students learning Italian as a foreign language, Twitter was a useful language learning tool (as cited in Hattem, 2012, p. 40). In this study, Antenos-Conforti realized that "majority of students felt Twitter helped increase their confidence in writing in Italian, responded positively towards instructor feedback given through Twitter, and negotiated meaning through Twitter for vocabulary learning" (as cited in Hattem, 2012, p. 40). Further, in a study conducted by Hattem (2012), 49 students learning English produced more than 3500 tweets. Hattem mention that through reading the tweets of each other, students noticed new grammatical structures. The fact that their classmates will read the tweets forced some students to write in a formal, grammatical manner. Moreover, the majority of students "were enthusiastic about using micro-blogging to improve their grammar" (p. 52). Actually, one students mentioned that "[p]racticing on Twitter helps me to use the same grammar in my essays without having to think so much about it" (p. 53). Also, the tweets in this study were recognized as a tool for corrective feedback that was provided by the teacher. Hattem (2012) postulates that "[t]he instructor was able to assist the students in noticing the gap in their production through systematic corrective feedback exchanges involving elicitations for reformulations" (p. 57).

Clearly, these studies highlight that Twitter can be used to help students develop their grammar and focus on form while writing. The role of grammar cant not be neglected in writing classrooms. Actually, writing skills are realized as one of the four different elements of writing self-efficacy beliefs. When it comes to writing, Troia, Shankand, and Wolbers (2010) postulate that self-efficacy "makes a significant independent contribution to variance in writing outcomes" (p. 74). Writing self-efficacy can be measured through writing skills, which focus on grammar, spelling, planning, editing, and writing task, which is related to the genre of writing, graded writing performance, or self-regulation in writing. Nevertheless, the

issue of privacy and safety might be a problem that is difficult to overcome when using Twitter in the classroom because it is hard to keep the conversations private, so anyone can post and respond to students' talks.

5. Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are used for the purpose of communicating and connecting socially with people (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010). The most famous example of a social networking site is Facebook. According to Towner and Muñoz (2011), until the end of 2010, Facebook reported "over 500 million active users" (p. 35). When individuals access their Facebook accounts, they become involved with different writing behaviors and join different groups that fulfill their educational curiosities. They will update their status, post a comment on their friend's wall, and write on their own wall. Also, one of the important things about Facebook is that users can join different academic or non-academic groups. For instance, if one is a fan of George Orwell, s/he can join a group that discusses his novels.

When using Facebook, students are engaged with reading and writing. So, the purpose behind using Facebook in L2 writing classes is to encourage students to write more. Actually, Limbu (2011) indicates that "Facebook has a potential to critically engage students and merge their roles as writers and readers in a digital environment" (p. 59). In a writing class, teachers can create a group, where all students are expected produce a written contribution. Students can, as Limbu (2011) mentions, share and express their ideas, interact and comment critically on their friends' writings, and critique certain topics. Further, because Facebook allows users to post documents or videos, Limbu (2011) asks her students to post their "reading responses, project inquiry questions, project outlines, and drafts" (p. 61). By doing this, I think that most students are given more chance, through a medium that they are highly comfortable with, to easily develop the content of their writing when working in groups. In addition, students seem to enjoy writing through Facebook. As Limbu (2011) asserts, "Facebook allows students to enter into a relationship understanding other discourse users, and it allows them to create complex cross-cultural contents in …writing" (p.62). Importantly, online interaction among students in the same classroom "increases class satisfaction, a sense of community and class performance" (Towner & Muñoz, 2011).

Similar to other web 2.0 tools, Facebook raises concern about safety and privacy. According to Facebook Help Center (2013), groups can either be open, closed or secret. I believe that for safety and privacy purposes in class, the group created should be a secret one, and the teacher should create it. This option will allow the teacher to add students to the group since s/he is the founding member. Also, this will make the group public only for its users, in this case teacher and students. So, such a group exists only to its members, enabling to read and comment on what is posted.

6. Social Bookmarking

According to Edwards and Mosley (2011), social bookmarking "is an online, Web 2.0 tool that lets users save (or bookmark) web addresses to their very own personal online account" (p. 212). Unlike the option bookmark or favorites provided by Safari, Internet Explorer and other browsers, social bookmarking can be accessed from any computer and gives users the chance to organize, tag, and share the bookmarked websites. Also, users can add further details about the website through writing notes about the marked websites (Edwards & Mosley, 2011; MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010). As Alexander (2006) indicates "researchers at all levels (students, faculty, staff) can quickly set up a social bookmarking page for their personal and/or professional inquiries" (p. 36). Delicious and Diigo are two examples of a social bookmarking websites that hold the characteristics mentioned above.

Social bookmarking is different than the other web 2.0 tools. The importance of this web 2.0 tool lies in the fact that it permits students to organize and classify the various resources they are using for any writing task and to remember their selections. For example, several students might add the APA website to their list because following the APA style is a requirement in almost all universities. Also, the use of social bookmarking encourages students to share their bookmarks (Edwards & Mosley, 2011; MacArthur &

Karchmer-Klein, 2010). Indeed, MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) comment that this advantage of bookmarking "fosters collaboration by creating a network of people with similar interests who share resources" (p. 59). Consequently, using this tool exposes students to various resources and enriches their repertoire about the topic they are planning to research and write about. One of the obvious drawbacks that might appear from the use of social bookmarking is that, as MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) indicate, students might bookmark pages that aren't appropriate. Thus, teachers should make sure that students are "taught how to analyze a website to determine its appropriateness for the purpose for which it was retrieved" (p. 60).

7. Conclusion

Web 2.0 tools allow students to engage in a collaborative learning environment. Through wikis, blogs, social networking, social bookmarking, and micro-blogging, students get the chance to share, create, and express their ideas with their classmates and with other Internet users. Wikis permit several users to contribute to a growing body of knowledge, blogs allow students to support one another, social networking gives students the chance to join online communities, and social bookmarking offers learners the option of connecting with people who share interests. Actually, Alexander (2006) postulates that "social writing platforms appear to be logistically useful tools for a variety of campus needs, from student group learning to faculty department work to staff collaborations" (p. 38). Importantly, using Vygotsky's term "scaffolding," I believe that web 2.0 tools, through collaboration and interaction, help scaffold classmates either by their peers or their teachers. In the studies mentioned above, peers' and teachers' feedback helped students a lot in focusing on meaning while writing, in correcting grammar mistakes, and in developing useful strategies to use while writing.

Using these web 2.0 tools in classes requires certain conditions. As, MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein (2010) indicate, teachers have to be "fluent" (p. 63) in using these technological interactive tools "before they can develop, implement, and evaluate a technology-based writing curriculum." Actually, both teachers and students should be fluent in using these tools. Class time can't be wasted on learning practical issues related to how these tools are used at the expense of learning the content of the subject matter, in this case writing. Also, teachers have to "repeatedly practice developing, implementing, and evaluating appropriate technology-based writing assignments with students." Further, teachers should reflect on their use of these tools in their classes. Taking these recommendations seriously gives teachers the opportunity to understand the drawbacks that might arise due to the use of these tools. Safety, privacy, and authorship might be problems that teachers can control. However, what if other problems arise? Teachers have to be ready for anything if they plan to use web 2.0 tools in their classes. As a matter of fact, web 2.0 represents a second language that net generation students are fluent at using. So, it is the teacher's role to decide how this language will be integrated and used in his/her classroom. Web 2.0 tools shouldn't be introduced haphazardly in the classroom; there should be a clear and well-defined procedure within the school curriculum that explains how these tools will be integrated into the lessons.

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