Chapter 14

Web 2.0 as Potential E-Learning Tools for K-12 English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Federal legislation demands academic success of all students as well as instructional modifications for special needs students. Even so, school districts struggle with funding educational programs and products that would greatly benefit students grappling with language and content acquisition. Free and open source Web 2.0 tools present exciting opportunities for the creation of educational material that reflects best teaching practices for English Language Learners. The chapter conducts an analysis of second language acquisition research that identifies the most common components of effective second language teaching practice. With these determined, the attention is focused on the characteristics of Web 2.0 technologies that might be used to promote educational activities and opportunities that embody these effective SLA pedagogical practices while meeting the unique instructional needs of ELL students. Although the chapter focuses on ELL students, many of the instructional methods and technology tool characteristics will benefit other students in all content areas.

INTRODUCTION

The population of English language learners (ELL) in the American public school system has increased dramatically in the last ten years. Of the 49 million students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, five million are English language learners, reflecting a growth of 57.17%

since 1995 (Department of Education, 2006). Along with the exponential growth in immigrant populations, ELL education reform has moved from a state-level issue to an important component of national policy. No Child Left Behind, the landmark 2001 legislation, now holds schools to a much higher level of accountability for ensuring the academic success of ELL students (Department of Education, 2004). The mandates of the Title III NCLB section push for a more rapid acquisition

of English language skills and the assessment of ELL students on the same content and level as other student groups. In addition, all students are expected to be linguistically ready to read, write and communicate within electronic environments by the 8th grade (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2005).

The continual growth and change of technology tools have created a new technological literacy, literacy that will continue to progress with the development of technology. Not only does the technologically literate person need a variety of technical skills, but must also be able to apply these skills across multiple contexts (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2000; Street, 1984). The combination of legislative and technological development in education presents teachers with new challenges within the struggle to meet the myriad of instructional requirements and unique needs of ELL students. To complicate matters, funding for professional development, technology products and tools, and even personnel is a continued concern for school districts. In a deteriorating economy, over thirty-seven states face crippling budget deficits, cutting over $15 billion from their 2008-2009 annual budgets (National Governors Association, 2008).

Free and open source Web 2.0 tools (e.g., podcasting, vodcasting, blogs, and wikis) present exciting opportunities for the creation of educational experiences and material that reflect best teaching practices for ELL students as identified in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research (Rose-Aguillar, 2007; Lacina, 2004; Brown & Green, 2008). Articles that focus on describing specific Web 2.0 tools serve as a strong starting point (Rose-Aguillar, 2007). However, the rapid pace of technological change and the abundance of freely available Web 2.0 tools can make the search for appropriate tools overwhelming. Therefore, it would seem more beneficial to focus on the particular characteristics Web 2.0 tools possess that would directly impact ELL instruction, and how these characteristics are favored in SLA research.

Hence, we begin with a comprehensive analysis of SLA theories and the effectiveness of Web 2.0 tools as they apply to sound second language teaching practices. Subsequent sections examine the unique instructional needs of ELL students and contemporary ELL teaching strategies. The final section explores how Web 2.0 tools might contribute to the performance of English language learners in acquiring a second language as well as a brief overview of recommended free and open-source Web 2.0 technologies. The authors would like to remind the reader that while the focus of this chapter is on English Language Learning, the pedagogical issues and use of the tools to be discussed are applicable to a number of other fields such as language arts and social studies. Cross-curricular applications to math and science can also be made.

SECOND LANGUAGE THEORY

Second languages encompass any languages beyond a learner's original language or 'mother tongue' referring to the learning of any language at a point in time after the acquisition of a learner's first language (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). Second language acquisition is considered a relatively new and developing field, and separate from its major contributor, Linguistics. Linguists focus on primary languages whereas SLA researchers study the issues and questions revolving secondary languages (Eckman, 1995). Perhaps because of its newness, SLA is not readily identified with any one specific theory. In fact, Eckman (1995) and Long (1993) consider the term 'SLA theory' to be misleading since consensus on a formal SLA theory has yet to be achieved. Even so, recent research has helped to focus the field's attention on language learning through social activities. This line of research suggests that collaborative interactions help learners acquire language, strongly questioning the idea of language learning as an individual mental activity contextually separate

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