

# Using Web 2.0 to Design Meaningful Language Learning Environments

Jiuguang Feng and Wei Wang

## Abstract

*This article reports on an exploratory study that examines how social networks can be used in foreign language teaching and learning. Qualitative data including interviews, online observations, and students' responses to open-ended survey questions was collected. The data suggests that there are both advantages and challenges associated with using social network technology in foreign language learning. Students also expressed concerns about privacy and other related issues when Web 2.0 is used in foreign language teaching.*

Higher education is moving toward a student-centered learning environment, and this movement has provoked a series of reforms, service-learning projects, learning communities, collaborative learning, and technology-enhanced classrooms (Daynes, Esplin, and Kristensen 2004). Foreign language teaching in Chinese colleges and universities has been a chronicle controversial topic because of its low efficiency and students' loss of interests (Xu 2007). Like most human activities, learning a second language happens in a social context, in which students can use foreign language to communicate with others in an authentic environment. For foreign language learners, the classroom is often their only exposure to the language. For many second-language scholars, however, formal classroom talk is still of relatively minor relevance (Doughty and Long 2003). This apparent lack of attention to the social and linguistic context of classrooms is not surprising and, as a result, other activities need to be incorporated into formal foreign language classroom instruction. Moreover, foreign language learning is not an individual task that takes place in a vacuum. Creating a warm and accepting atmosphere to minimize the anxiety and threat felt during language learning is very helpful for foreign language learners. Therefore, incorporating non-instruction activities within meaningful language context is critical to improving the efficiency of foreign language teaching and learning.

Information technology, especially Web 2.0 tools, has shortened the distance between people and makes communication easier and quicker. As a type of emerging technology, Web 2.0 is a metaphor that implies a paradigm shift in the manner that web technology is used. In our modern world, instead of passive consumption-based learning, we are living in a participatory age where learners have a voice and they have ownership over their own learning. The Web 2.0 (also called the Read-Write Web) empowers learners to generate ideas and comments online, rather than simply reading or browsing as Web 1.0 tools offer. The most common Web 2.0 tools include blogs, wikis, Skype, and multi-user virtual environment (MUVE). Many of these Web 2.0 tools have been integrated into foreign language classrooms to enhance students' learning (Yang and Chang 2008). Until now, the most often used technology tool in foreign language class was PowerPoint®, and it has been primarily used as a tool to facilitate direct instruction (Xu

2007). However, foreign language teachers need to go beyond PowerPoint in terms of their technology integration effort in foreign language classrooms. Specifically, it is critically important to explore some of the Web 2.0 tools in order to identify the benefits of those technologies in foreign language teaching and learning.

Despite the great potentials that Web 2.0 could offer foreign language learning, it is still not an easy decision for foreign language educators and administrators to make. When adopting Web 2.0 in foreign language teaching, various factors need to be taken into consideration. Cost effectiveness, the appropriateness of the instructional design, the availability of specific online tools, and the issues of privacy are some of the factors that must be considered (Feng and Song 2010). Nevertheless, helping students to learn a foreign language in a meaningful learning environment is a key benefit of using Web 2.0. This article outlines important aspects of a Web 2.0-supported foreign language learning classroom, including promising aspects of Web 2.0 tools, instructional activities, and the issues of privacy and technological difficulties.

## **Literature Review**

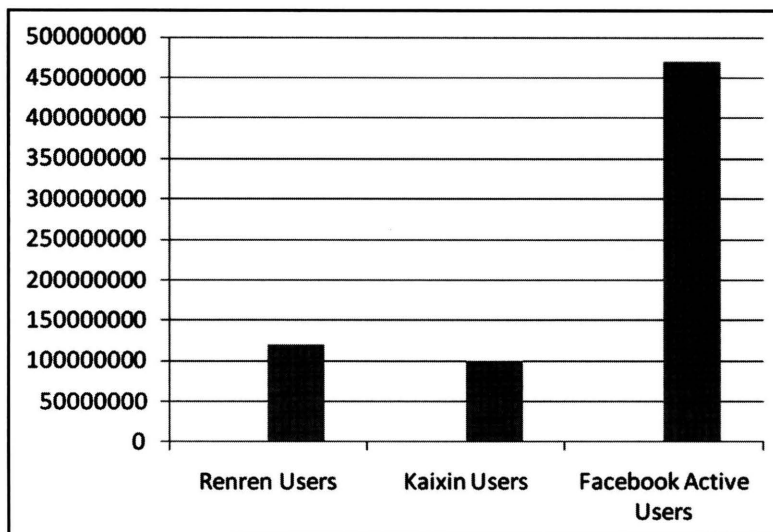
Today, new opportunities for foreign language teaching are provided through emerging technologies, such as Facebook, wikis, blogs, Skype, MUVE, and other synchronous and asynchronous online tools. These technologies incorporate all forms of communication between individuals and among groups via networked computers. According to Prensky (2001), students born after 1980 are “digital natives” because they have grown up with digital media and spend a great deal of time engaging new digital technologies and the Internet. Based on Prensky’s definition, our current university students surely fall into the digital native category (Prensky 2001). Prensky (2001) described in detail the media consumption habits of these so-called digital natives: average college graduates spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but more than 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV).

Over the past decade, there has been a substantial increase of Internet users in developing countries, such as China (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC] 2011). Based on the CNNIC’s 2011 report, there are about a half billion Internet users in China, although there are huge disparities among different regions (CNNIC 2011). The urban (especially the metropolitan) areas have a much higher percentage of Internet users than the rural and less urbanized areas. For example, the two largest metropolitan areas in China are Shanghai and Beijing; the percentages of Internet users are 69.4 percent and 64.5 percent, respectively—the highest in China and far above the national average (CNNIC 2011).

Comparably, there are more than 500 million active Facebook users worldwide and over half of the active users log in to Facebook in any given day ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)). Due to the inaccessibility of Facebook in China, the Chinese versions of Facebook, Renren and Kaixin, have increased in popularity in the past few years. According to statistics, by the end of 2011 there were about 120 million Renren ([www.renren.com](http://www.renren.com)) users and about 100 million Kaixin users ([www.kaixin001.com](http://www.kaixin001.com)) in China (see Figure 1). Although social

networks have the potential to enable students to collaborate with others independent of time and geography (Slagter von Tryon and Bishop 2009) and have a far-reaching impact on students' lives outside of school, most educators still don't know very much about how to harness those social networks in their teaching and students' learning.

**Figure 1: A Comparison of Renren, Kaixin, and Facebook Active Users**



Although it is difficult to get general statistics about how widespread the use of Web 2.0 is in foreign language teaching, some educators have tried various web tools to enhance students' foreign language learning in and out of the classroom. For example, Wang et al. (2009) conducted a collaborative Second Life (SL) program (multi-user virtual environment) between Georgia State University and Yan Tai University in China. (Second Life is an online virtual world where residents can interact with each other through avatars.) In this SL project, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in China were asked to accomplish various tasks in SL, including interviewing American students about their perspectives on globalization in order to write for the Yan Tai University newsletter. EFL students also were interviewed by American students about their universities lives in China (Wang et al. 2009).

Yang and Chang (2008) conducted an experimental study to determine the effectiveness of conversations using the Skype service in improving the English language skills of the English Language Learners (ELL) students at a Taiwanese college. Students in the experimental group used Skype to practice English, while a comparison group attended university English classes. Although results indicated that the Skype users showed no improvement over the comparison group in terms of oral proficiency in English, the authors discussed several possible reasons for the insignificant improvement in oral proficiency: (1) limited time for practice, (2) necessity for English-teaching assistants/ teachers, and (3) the design of discussion activities (Yang and Chang 2008). Both Second Life and Skype are typical Web 2.0 tools, and the key element in both Web 2.0 studies is that they provided students

opportunities to practice both their oral and written English in meaningful and authentic situations.

In summary, many language educators and researchers have investigated ways to provide high-quality opportunities to support language acquisition. While there is much disagreement about the specifics of an optimal language-learning environment, Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) suggest eight conditions for an optimal language-learning environment that are most widely researched and supported in the second language acquisition (SLA) and learning theory literature. The conditions frequently are pointed out in related literature on integrating the use of computers into language learning by describing how instructors can use computers to facilitate and guide technology deployment in the language classroom:

- Learners have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning.
- Learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience.
- Learners are involved in authentic tasks.
- Learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language.
- Learners have enough time and feedback.
- Learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process.
- Learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level.
- Learner autonomy is supported.

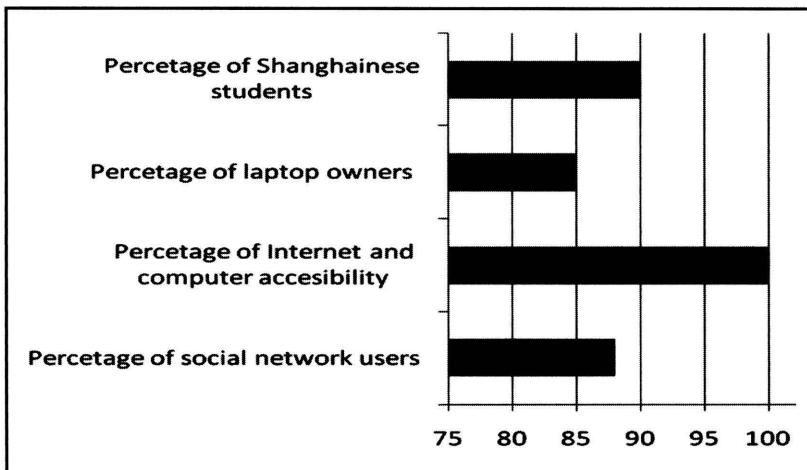
## **Background**

Participants in the study included forty-five students from one undergraduate class in a normal university (Teachers' college) in a metropolitan in Asia. The study's investigators were motivated because of their interdisciplinary backgrounds—both instructional technology and foreign language teaching. Moreover, the teachers have been motivated to explore more effective instructional approaches in a college English classroom in College English Reform in China.

In order to investigate the students' accessibility to computers and the Internet before the study, the researchers conducted a pre-study survey to collect students' demographic information and information about their general computer and Internet access. Based on the survey, about 90 percent of the students were from Shanghai and the rest were from other Chinese provinces. The students were majoring in Exhibition and Tourism, and English was one of their most important subjects. About 85 percent of the students had laptops and all of the students had access to the computer and internet at home, Internet cafés, or the school's computer labs. Not surprisingly, a majority of students (88 percent)

were regular users of either Renren or Kaixin (the Chinese versions of Facebook). Although this was a small-scale study, and it was difficult to obtain data from a larger sample, logging into social networks regularly and sharing personal lives with family and friends is becoming more and more common among students in wealthier urban and suburban universities worldwide. Educators must keep Net Gen characteristics in mind with foreign language course design and that students are social human beings as learners.

**Figure 2: Demographic Information of Participants in the Study**



## Method

According to Earl (1989), the research adopted an exploratory design—a design model in which researchers used no earlier models from similar research as a basis—and it is qualitative in nature. The purpose of this exploratory study was to evaluate the use of a social network technology to enhance Chinese students’ English learning experience. Specifically, the study investigated three research questions:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Ning and other social networks in foreign language teaching on metropolitan university campuses?
2. What are the difficulties of using social networks, especially Ning, in foreign language teaching on metropolitan university campuses?
3. What are students’ perceptions of using social networks, especially Ning, in foreign language learning on metropolitan university campuses

The data for this study came from students’ responses to the open-ended questions, students’ midterm oral English videos, observation notes on both network and face-to-face classes, and recorded classroom discussion on students’ experience with Ning. The process of relying on numerous sources of data (such as observation, interviews, and survey questions), data triangulation, helps a researcher generate more valid and robust descriptions and explanations (Stake 2000).

## Ning's Background

Ning is an online platform for people to create their own social networks. Ning is appealing to people who want to create their own social networks around specific interests with their own visual design, choice of features, and member data. On Ning, members have pages where they can post personal data such as photos, videos, and blog entries. While at the community level, participants can join focused groups where they can unite to share insights and discuss issues.

In this study, the researcher created a Ning network called *College English* at that university and invited students to become members of this network. After teachers entered the site, they were on the main page that listed upcoming events, recent blogs, groups, and discussion forums. From there, they could enter their personal page, discussions, and forums that they were following or groups to which they belonged. The advantages of Ning include its user friendliness, the colorfulness of the interface, and privacy. In the preliminary stage, the researchers set the network as private after all students joined the network, so that others could not view the web site. Students were asked to post their midterm oral English videos by using a webcam or other available video facilities, such as camcorders and cell phones. After the students uploaded their videos, they were asked to compare their traditional midterm oral English (face-to-face) experience with their new experience with Ning. When the students finished the activities on Ning, they were asked to comment on their experiences with Ning freely in English when they met in class and the instructors recorded the class discussion about using Ning.

Generally speaking, Ning was very well received by the students except for the speed of uploading videos. The results of the study have showed that students particularly liked the user-friendliness and colorfulness of the interface, which are almost common characteristics of Web 2.0 tools. Users can easily upload pictures and videos, although it might be time consuming to upload long videos (longer than three minutes). The biggest disadvantage for Ning is that it is no longer free. Many of the previous Ning users might have stopped using Ning because of its fee. As it is no longer free, the instructors must consider funding when they want to use Ning.

## Findings: Planned Instructional Activities

For this study, students participated in several instructional activities making use of Web 2.0 tools and activities designed to provide meaningful contexts for them to learn a foreign language. In the beginning, the instructors asked students to make individual videos on assigned topics, then they were asked to comment on their peers' videos, and finally, to led discussions in English. The students also were asked to answer open-ended questions about their Ning experience on Ning's web site and their face-to-face meetings in the classroom. The following discusses these activities and the benefits found in the study in more detail:

- **Foreign language videos:** In the study, the students were asked to make a short English video to talk about assigned topics. The instructor gave the students a wide

range of topics from which to choose. In addition, students also could talk about other topics if they received permission from their English instructors. Some of the topics were “What are the advantages and disadvantages of your university?”, “Should a student be allowed to have a part-time job?”, “Which restaurant do you like best and why?”, and “What do you think of the Expo, 2010 Shanghai?” About 30 percent of the options were related to topics in their reading, listening, and speaking textbooks, while for other topics they needed to use what they learned to express their opinions.

In the study, the instructors did not specifically ask students to use any movie editing software, such as Movie Maker and I Movie. Five students used Movie Maker, and the rest of the students simply used the video that they recorded without editing it using movie editing software. In this activity, the students were told that they were going to be put under the spotlight and that their videos were going to be discussed amongst their peers. One student wrote in her feedback, “compared with the traditional oral exam, the new form of the exam is fresh and I have [been] encouraged more to communicate in English with my peers and teacher.” Moreover, it was an ongoing discussion because there was a time period for students to talk about the videos.

- **Discussion online in the target language:** In the study, the students originally were asked to comment in English on at least three of their classmates’ videos. They were told that they were going to be graded by not only the number of their posts, but also by the quality of their posts. A total of 224 messages were posted on the online discussion group during the period. These messages were categorized into fully task-specified messages (which were detailed and specific messages), partially task-specified messages (which were partially related to the topic), and general messages (which were almost irrelevant to the topic).

To be more specific, while fully task-specified messages provided feedback that specifically addressed the content of the video, partially task-focused messages were those that did not specifically address the videos’ content, but addressed forms or some other aspects related to the content. For example, commenting on a doll mask in the video, such as “Your doll mask is cute,” is considered to be general messages such as “Great work” or “I really like your video.”

Task-specified messages account for the majority of all messages (65.6 percent or 147 messages), because students had been required to post quality feedback to their peers. Those messages were related closely to the topic. For example, here’s a comment on a video on advantages and disadvantages of the university: “I really agree with your comments about the advantages about our university. However, I disagree with your comments about the college English teachers. Although many teachers like to lecture all the time, some [changing] were happening.” However, some messages were partially task-specified messages (25 percent or 56 messages). The remaining nine were general messages (9.4 percent or 21 messages). Through posting these messages, especially task-specified messages, students were motivated to communicate with their peers in English, which was a very different learning experience for students when compared with the traditional English classroom.

There were two possible reasons for students to post general messages. First, some students' limited English abilities hinder them to express themselves effectively, so more foreign language learning activities in authentic contexts are needed. Second, because students were required to post a certain amount of messages, some students posted those general messages in order to either meet the basic requirements, or they thought that they could get extra credit.

- **Online survey:** In the study, Blog Post was used for students to answer three survey questions after they posted their videos and commented on their classmates' videos. The three survey questions asked whether they encountered problems during the project, what kind of advantages Ning has for foreign language teaching, and what suggestion they would offer if the instructor wants to replicate the study. Thirty-four students responded to the four survey questions. Although students confronted various technical problems, such as the speed of uploading the video and the compatibility of the video format, almost all of the students expressed various degrees of positive feedback about Ning (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Example of a Student's Survey Response**

First, the problem I met is that when I signed up to be a member of this network, I couldn't see the picture showing the words I should type though I refresh it again & again. What's more, my uploading speed was such a turtle-speed that I've been staring at the screen for almost 10min.

Next, I wanna mention the fact that maybe the network is immature so everyone can see other's videos even though he is not the member of this net, which can not protect one's privacy so we must take a mask or shoot a pillow. That can be improved.

Third, I want to exclaim BRAVO! Because it's free! I can choose my spare time to complete the task, and the topic of the video depends on my own interest. Compared with the traditional way, the new one may get all students' favour.

Finally, I think NING's pages are tidy enough. In addition to the page style, the videos can be hidden when web traveller open the main page. Hope it keep and enhance.

In the commenting activity and online survey activity, students were immersed in language learning and tried their best to express their opinions about the survey questions at the end of the course. Although some of them made quite a few grammatical errors, the value of the activities was that students were fully immersed in the authentic language learning environment.

## **Findings: Non-instructional Activities**

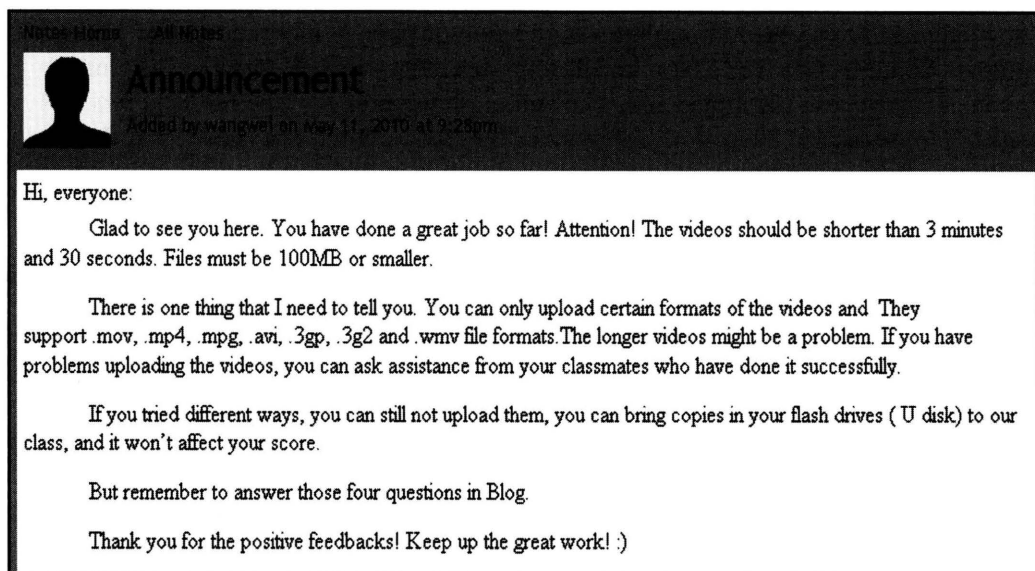
In order to apply the conditions in foreign language instructional design, besides planned instructional activity, non-instructional activity accompanied by the planned activities effectively can enhance learning as well. For example, in the study the instructor had issued few announcements in English (see Figure 4) and received and replied to thirty-three students' e-mails in English. In those activities, foreign language learners interacted with an authentic audience (their English instructor to clarify information), and those tasks were authentic tasks that were not required, but they felt the real need to conduct those non-instructional activities by using the target language



(Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith 1999). This is because they have to understand their teachers and peers and express themselves in English to participate in these carefully designed Web 2.0 English learning activities.

---

**Figure 4: An Announcement in English in Response to When Students Confronted Technical Difficulties**



Generally speaking, technology offers “the capacity to radically change the educational system . . . to better motivate students as engaged learners rather than learners who are primarily passive observers of the educational process” (Ziegler 2007, 68) and provides promising informal and non-formal contexts for learning to supplement school-based experiences (Greenhow and Robelia 2009). Although the literature indicates that technology can facilitate language learning in many ways, without proper and thoughtful integration into the regular course, it will not be as effective as it should be (McCarthy 1999). The impact of technology depends largely on the quality of the instructional design implementation (Kulik 1994).

Therefore, instructional activities in a Web 2.0–supported foreign language classroom should take advantage of the interactivity features of Web 2.0 tools and, thus, provide abundant opportunities for students to use English in meaningful contexts and to communicate with their teachers and other English learners facilitated by this interactive technology. These activities were aimed at helping students use technology to enhance social learning within formal foreign language classrooms. It was expected that informal learning also would take place both in and out of the foreign language classroom via online social networks.

## **Using Web 2.0 Tools to Create Meaningful Language Learning Environments**

A typical traditional foreign language class usually is characterized with teachers' direct instruction on grammar and vocabulary and the students' memorization on the language points. The instructional design models for the traditional computer-mediated teaching and learning models have been built upon behaviorist and objectivist views of knowledge and expressed through the acquisition of passive inert knowledge without context (Young 2003). For example, a foreign language teacher uses PowerPoint for key vocabulary with illustrated sentence and grammar points in the text and requires students to memorize them. According to Young, the research has shown that the traditional foreign language instructional approach is ineffective because of its lacking of meaningful context (2003).

In contrast, the key for using Web 2.0 tools in foreign language teaching is to use them to support a meaningful environment rather than to facilitate direct instruction in traditional foreign language instructional approach. In this study, besides preplanned English learning activities, there have been other non-instructional activities, or even unplanned activities, which provide students opportunities to practice English. During the study, the teachers received about ten e-mails in English from students about the project and the instructors posted announcements in English regularly. Moreover, the students explored other English materials on the Ning web site. There are various promising aspects of Web 2.0 in foreign language teaching, and the overall student feedback in my study reflects many of those promising aspects. Some of those aspects were incorporated more successfully into the activities and reflected in the students' feedback in this study, while other aspects mentioned in the students' general comments had not been incorporated and could be used as reference tools in educators' future research and exploration. Based on student feedback, using Ning helped foreign language students in the following ways.

- Social networking enabled students to collaborate with others independent of time and geography (a finding also supported by the research of Slagter von Tryon and Bishop 2009). To some extent, the use of Ning in the English class enhanced students' foreign language learning experiences and was more cost effective. The study's initial activity was that students uploaded an English video on a topic assigned by the instructor. Taking part in the midterm oral exam is usually a single, two-minute process with students having to wait for an hour for their turn. Because there is a large number of students in each English class (an average of thirty to fifty students), teachers didn't have time to interact with students during the oral exam, and there also was no interaction between students and their peers. In contrast, a Ning midterm oral exam was more effective and productive because students could stay at home and finish the video, and there were follow-up activities in which students collaborated with peers. The following presents some of the students' comments addressing the aspect of how Ning enhanced and simplified their test taking experience:

“Ning simplifies our mid-exam.”

“This way is very creative. I love it. Though I spent more time on making this video and commenting my peers than the traditional one, I can sleep later in the morning. Ha ha~~”

- The most profound impact of the Internet is its ability to support and expand the various aspects of social learning (Brown and Adler 2008). In the study’s feedback from the students, students mentioned the possibility to make foreign friends, their eagerness to communicate with their classmates in English, and desire to learn English well in order to better communicate with others in English in the future. As one student wrote, “I will improve my poor English. Since Ning is a network accessible worldwide, I can meet other people from other countries.” Although using English was not required for the communication between students and the instructor, the instructor received students’ e-mails in English and responded to all of them in English during the study. Moreover, the instructor also had posted English announcements to encourage students’ continuous efforts in the project and troubleshooting their technical difficulties. As a matter of fact, Ning, Facebook, Renren, Kaixin, and Myspace are all similar in essence because the primary purpose of these web sites is to help people connect and to enhance communication between people. The Internet represents a new mode of production for knowledge and interaction (Sandholtz, Ringstaff, and Dwyer 1997).
- Web 2.0 tools cannot only make for effective activities inside foreign language classrooms, but also expand the learning activities outside of the classroom. In the study’s feedback from the students, students mentioned various non-instructional activities that they would like to do outside of the class, such as making foreign friends, listening to western music, listening to English news, and communicating with their classmates in English. Vice Provost of University of Michigan, John King, for example, says that students extend their classroom discussions, debates, bull sessions, and study groups to include their broader networks—Instant Messaging (IM), Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter—amplifying the university’s impact (Brown and Adler 2008).

Based on a review of the literature, the instructor’s reflection on course activities, and the results of the study’s online survey, it seems that computers and the Internet have been increasingly accessible and affordable for students, and they thought that Ning had great potential to enhance their language learning. Such communicative interaction is crucial, because it is essential for an individual’s success in today’s fast-paced and increasingly globalized world. For example, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages released *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, which set “Five C’s” as the standards for foreign language learners in America (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). The Five C’s are as follows:

1. Communication: communicate in languages other than English.
2. Cultures: gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures.
3. Connections: connect with other disciplines and acquire information.
4. Comparisons: develop insight into the nature of language and culture.
5. Communities: participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

With the help of the Internet and Web 2.0, these five C standards can be more effectively incorporated into foreign language teaching to create a meaningful and authentic foreign language-learning environment. Internet technology, especially Web 2.0 tools, make people who speak languages other than English more accessible to each other and enables students all over the world to communicate and connect with people of different cultures in ways that previous generations could not even imagine.

## **The Possible Challenges of Web 2.0 Tool Use in a Foreign Language Classroom**

Although there are great potentials for Web 2.0 tools use in foreign language classrooms, there are numerous factors that must be taken into consideration when deciding to use Web 2.0—examples include the effectiveness of the instructional activities conducted using these tools, the availability of these tools, potential technical difficulties of the tools, and their cost. Following three of the more serious challenges are discussed:

1. **Technical Problems:** About sixty percent of the students in this study mentioned technical difficulties associated with uploading their videos. The difficulties included the incompatibility of the video format and length of upload time. One student indicated that the biggest problem of Ning was the speed of uploading, because many students didn't like waiting. However, it is important to remember that it is not rare that students confront difficulties when they begin to use a new tool in their learning, and the degree of difficulties or the tool's complexity are negatively related to their willingness to adopt it (Rogers 1995). Based on the students' survey, forty-five percent of the students reported that it took an "incredibly" long time to upload the video, and some students were confused about what format of the video could be uploaded. To solve the technical problems, instructors should test whether there are technical problems, such as how much time it needs to upload a video and compatibility issues, beforehand. Moreover, the instructor's timely feedback in the study also helped to solve the technical difficulties.
2. **Privacy and Other Legal and Ethical Issues:** Of course, Web 2.0 users in this study or any other course could engage in inappropriate behavior, such as illegal file-sharing (copyright infringement), spamming, multiple identities, identity deception, and illicit materials (Kerbs 2005). Other inappropriate activities in the

virtual world include breach of privacy, eavesdropping, exploitation, violating professional ethics, violating confidentiality, and sharing proprietary information (Kerbs 2005). For example, in the study one student expressed her concerns about online plagiarism: “Although Ning simplifies our mid-exam, it won’t do good to those people who lack self-discipline in learning English. Perhaps they just find some writings on line, and read before the camera to pass the exam.” Privacy issues also were mentioned repeatedly in students’ feedback. Because we set Ning information as public in the preliminary stage for convenience in this study, seven students expressed concerns about privacy issues. One student wrote, “Everything and everyone is open to the public. Maybe someone does not want to let his work to be known to us. But here he (or she) has no other choice.” Perhaps indicative of this concern, none of the students used their real pictures in their personal profiles and only two male students showed their faces in the videos; the rest of them used something to cover their faces (like pillows).

- 3. The Incongruence with the Existing Teaching Practice and Evaluation System:** Although using computers is ubiquitous in college English classrooms in colleges and universities, they are primarily used as a tool for teachers’ direct instruction and for playing English movies with Chinese subtitles (Xu 2007). Moreover, the College English Test (CET) has always emphasized students’ memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary (Xu 2007). As previously discussed, the integration of Web 2.0 tools to foreign language classrooms is to enhance the students’ ability to communicate in English in a meaningful context, which is a radical departure from the traditional foreign language instructional approach. Therefore, it’s non-congruent with the existing foreign language teaching practice, and the evaluation system might be one of the biggest barriers.

## **Other Possible Web 2.0 Tools for Foreign Language Classroom**

Although the Web 1.0 tools that emerged in the last ten years of the last century vastly expanded access to information for learners, the Web 2.0 tools are initiating an even more far-reaching revolution in teaching and learning. Tools such as blogs, wikis, social networks, and MUVES are examples of a new user-centric information tool model emphasizing participation (creating and remixing, for example). Web 2.0 tools also are recognized for providing channels for informal and unstructured constructive learning. For example, the use of the Web 2.0 tools in foreign language teaching has the potential to re-engage individuals with learning and education and promote “critical thinking in learners” about their learning, which is one of “the traditional objectives” of education’ (Bugeja 2008). Some researchers argue that Web 2.0 tools offer “the capacity to radically change the educational system . . . to better motivate students as engaged learners rather than learners who are primarily passive observers of the educational process” (Ziegler 2007, 69). Following are three Web 2.0 tools that show promise in the foreign language classroom.

- **Wiki:** A wiki is usually a free Web 2.0 tool that enables users to add and update content on a web site using their own web browser. The popular wiki sites among educators include Wikispaces ([www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)), PBworks ([www.pbworks.com](http://www.pbworks.com)), and Wetpaint ([www.wetpaint.com](http://www.wetpaint.com)). The openness of wiki sites provides great opportunities for teaching and learning foreign languages, especially for collaborative writing. Wikis can be used in foreign language learning to encourage student interactions and discovery, while helping the students acquire the linguistic content of the language course. Wiki has not been used in this particular study, but the researchers are planning to implement it in a collaborative online writing project in future research. The students in each group will be asked to write an article responding to the following question: “Is American education superior to Chinese education?” This question is an example of a topic related to the text used in the course. Two students would need to check and review each other’s article, comment on it, and correct their peer’s mistakes when it is necessary in a Wiki site. In addition, they also will be asked to write a short reflection passage to summarize their collaborative English writing experience. The disadvantage of wikis is that while it is free, it is an open forum, and everybody can view the content. If the foreign language instructors want to set the wiki site private, they have to pay for it.
- **Glogster:** Glogster is a Web 2.0 tool that enables users to create interactive media posters and embed them in their Wiki or other web sites ([www.glogster.com](http://www.glogster.com)). There are different opportunities for using Glogster in foreign language teaching. For example, instructors and students can use Glogster to illustrate course topics with text, images, and sound. Compared with the traditional poster, Glogster is much more interactive and versatile because of its user-friendly, colorful, and capabilities to mingle text, sound, and images in a poster. Students also can share their posters online and embed them in wikis, blogs, and other web sites, so it encourages foreign language users to show their understanding of the foreign language and culture. Glogster also is totally free. The possible disadvantage of Glogster is that some instructors and students might think there is too much information in a poster, making it difficult for the readers to absorb. Such a situation is not congruent with the “cognitive load theory,” due to this excess of information. Although it is sometimes helpful to foreign language learners (especially beginners) to have learning materials presented through multi channels (such as English learners watching movies with English subtitles [both listening and reading]), instructors and learners still need to take the cognitive load theory into consideration when they create Glogster online posters.
- **Educational MUVE:** The multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) is not a new concept, and it has been discussed in literature for almost two decades (Cobb and Frazer 2005). However, its application in education has started gaining popularity only over the last five years, with around 180 virtual worlds presently available or under development (de Freitas 2008). One of the most popular MUVE is Second Life. Second Life (SL) is an online virtual world developed by Linden Lab, a high-tech company in California. SL enables its users, called residents, to interact with each other through avatars, or graphic representations of the users. Residents can

explore the virtual world, meet other SL residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)).

Language is one of the most important aspects of the culture of a particular cultural group, and the relationship of that culture to the learners' language community is extremely important. The virtual community and presence in SL gives the residents seemingly real experiences in which to communicate and interact with each through avatars, and that is the most important advantage for Second Life. For example, Chinese language learners can visit the virtual Great Wall or Forbidden City through their avatars and English language learners can dress up in costumes and role play one of Shakespeare's plays through their avatars in SL. However, because it is a different world that only virtually exists, the disadvantages of SL are its technical and cultural difficulties (Feng and Song 2010). Using SL in a foreign language course might represent a great barrier for foreign language instructors because when compared with other Web 2.0 tools, it takes a long time for SL users to become familiar with the interface (Feng and Song 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Some of the advantages of Ning identified in this study include its convenience, its support of a communicative language-learning environment, and its ability greatly encourages students. Convenience is an advantage shared by many Web 2.0 tools, and such convenience was mentioned widely in the students' interviews: "Maybe I think the most important for me is that I needn't get up so early in the morning on Monday. . . ." Using a Web 2.0 tool such as Ning to post videos and add comments could be an effective substitute for the traditional method of oral examination in foreign language teaching.

Another advantage students mentioned in this study was their passion about social networks, especially using Ning as a platform to meet English-speaking people and practice English. One student wrote, "I will improve my poor English. Since Ning is a network accessible worldwide, I can meet other people from other countries." Another student wrote, "The experience for me was a very amusing one. In my school life, I've never had this kind of mid-term oral exam, in the process of making the video; I felt that I was more interested in English. Compared with the traditional oral exam, I like this new method better because it made me feel more relaxed so that I could show my strength better."

The findings of this study also have shown that some Web 2.0 tools could create a meaningful language context to improve students' language learning, but only if the technological intervention is designed carefully to support a communicative language teaching approach. The implications are not only relevant or interesting to universities in China, but also outside of China. Educators could use social networks to teach foreign language in universities to create a meaningful context for students to communicate by using the target language. For instance, in the study students went beyond basic requirements of responses and engaged in communication with each

other. Although, the conversation in English in the study sometime went off topic, it is quite natural, and the instructor encouraged students to communicate freely about whatever they were interested in as long as they spoke in English. Because cost is often an important factor when deciding on using a specific technology, it is important to note that many Web 2.0 tools and online social networks are free or have a minimal fee. Foreign language instructors can take advantage of Web 2.0 tools to improve students' learning at low cost. Although Ning is no longer free, there are other alternative web tools, such as wiki and Edmodo ([www.edmodo.com](http://www.edmodo.com)).

In summary, Web 2.0 tools are more than just a platform for personal interactions outside of classrooms in urban and metropolitan universities, and they can become an indispensable tool in foreign language classroom due to the advantages previously discussed. Integrating online social networks into teaching will enable foreign language instructors not only to take advantage of technology in teaching, but also to transform traditional classrooms into a new learning environment where students take their full initiatives in foreign language learning.

## References

Brwon, John Seely, and Richard P. Adler. 2008. "Minds on Fire: Open Education, the Long Tail, and Learning 2.0." *EDUCAUSE Review* 43 (1): 17–32.

Bugeja, Michael. 2008. "Facing the Facebook." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52 (21): C1–C4.

The Bureau of Higher Education of Ministry of Education China. 2007. *Instructional Goal for College English Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). 2011. "The 27th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China." Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC).

Cobb, Sue, and D. Fraser. 2005. "Multimedia Learning in Virtual Reality." *The Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning*. Edited by R. Mayer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 525–548.

Daynes, G., P. Esplin, and K. Kristensen. 2004. "Learning as an Epidemic: The Tipping Point, Freshman Academy, and Institutional Change." *London Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 8 (4): 113–118.

de Freitas, S. 2008. *Serious Virtual Worlds: A Scoping Study*. Bristol, UK: Joint Information Systems Committee.



Doughty, Catherine J., and Michael H. Long, eds. 2003. *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Earl, M. J., ed. 1989. *Management Strategies for Information Technology*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Egbert, J., Chau, C., and E. Hanson-Smith. 1999. "Computer Enhanced Language Learning Environments: An Overview." *CALL Environments: Research, Practice, and Critical Issues*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Feng, J., and Liyan Song. 2010. "Teaching in Second Life: Students and Instructors' Perceptions." Paper presented at the International Conference for the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE), San Diego, CA.

Greenhow, C., and E. Robelia. 2009. "Old Communication, New Literacies: Social Network Sites as Social Learning Resources." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (4): 1130–1161.

Kerbs, R. W. 2005. "Social and Ethical Considerations in Virtual Worlds." *The Electronic Library* 5 (23): 539–547.

Kulik, J. A. 1994. Meta-Analytic Studies of Findings on Computer-Based Instruction." *Technology Assessment in Education and Training*. Edited by E. L. Baker and H. F. O'Neil. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 9–33.

McCarthy, B. 1999. "Integration: The Sine Qua Non of CALL." *CALL-EJ* 1 (2).

National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. 2006. *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, 3rd ed. Yonkers, NY: Author.

Prensky, M. 2001. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." *On the Horizon* 9 (5): 1–6.

Rogers, E. M. 1995. *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York: Free Press.

Sandholtz, J. H., C. Ringstaff, and D. C. Dwyer. 1997. *Teaching with Technology: Creating Student-Centered Classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Slagter van Tyron, P. J., and M. J. Bishop. 2009. "Theoretical Foundations for Enhancing Social Connectedness in Online Learning Environments." *Distance Education* 30 (3): 291–315.

Stake, R. E. 2000. "Case studies." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2ed. Edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd., 435–454.

Wang, Song, Stone, and Yan, 2009. "Integrating Second Life into an EFL Program in China: Research Collaborations Across the Continents." *Tech Trend* 53 (6).

Xu, X. 2007. "The Reform and Research of College English Teaching Models." *Journal of Taishan College* 55 (1).

Yang, Ya-Ting, and Ling-Yin Chang. 2008. "No Improvement—Reflections and Suggestions on The Use of Skype to Enhance College Students' Oral English Proficiency." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 39 (4): 721–725.

Young, Lisa D. 2003. "Bridging Theory and Practice: Developing Guidelines to Facilitate the Design of Computer-Based Learning Environments." *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology* 29 (3).

Ziegler, S. 2007. "The (Mis)education of Generation M." *Learning, Media and Technology* 32 (1): 69–81.

### **Author Information**

Jiuguang Feng is a graduate student of instructional technology at Towson University. His research interests include emerging technology, Web 2.0 tools, technology integration, educational multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), and technology integration in foreign language teaching.

Wei Wang is a college English teacher at Shanghai Normal University. Her research interests include college English teaching and technology integration in foreign language teaching.

Jiuguang Feng  
Towson University  
Ed Tech Center  
College of Education  
8000 York Road  
Towson, MD 20232  
E-mail: frankguang@yahoo.com  
Telephone: 443-468-6539

Wei Wang  
Shanghai Normal University  
College of Foreign Language  
100 Guilin Road  
Xuhui District, Shanghai 200234  
E-mail: wangweirene@yahoo.com  
Telephone: 011-86-134-8207-7259