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ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS: STUDENT RESPONSES TO LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS

Abstract

This action research based case study addresses the situation of a first year class of Business English students at Universidad de Alcalá and their attitudes towards using Web 2.0 tools and social media for language learning. During the semester, the students were asked to collaborate in the creation and use of some tools such as blogs, video repositories (YouTube), networking programs (LinkedIn), and communication tools (SlideShare). The data were obtained through an online questionnaire designed after a focus group had been held. The results, which are quantitative, suggest that the use of Web 2.0 tools and social networks for language learning facilitated collaboration within the groups when completing tasks, proved to be motivating, and made a clear distinction from traditional university language courses, often centered on the teacher and the syllabus contents. In addition, the students viewed the tools as being important for their future as professionals in the business world. While the sample in this study is limited and, hence, the results are not universally applicable, there is evidence that this method of learning may work well in a variety of international contexts.

Key words

ESP, business English, higher education, Web 2.0, social networking, blogs, student perceptions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Web 2.0 and language teaching

Web 2.0 is a term that describes the changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and Web design that aim to enhance creativity, secure information sharing, increase collaboration, and improve the functionality of the Web as we know it (Web 1.0). These possibilities have led to the development and evolution of Web-based communities and hosted services (Abdelmalak, 2015), such as social-networking sites (i.e. Facebook, MySpace), video sharing sites (i.e. YouTube), wikis, blogs, etc. (Stern, n.d.; 1; see also Craig, 2013; García Laborda, 2011; Villano, 2008). Some of these Web 2.0 tools have existed for a number of years. At this point many people are familiar with or have at least heard of e-mail, blogs, social networks, and wikis. A good number of publications have addressed their importance and have pointed out their value as informative and pedagogical tools (among others Jimoyiannis, Tsiotakis, & Roussinos, 2013; Morgan, 2012; Tıfarilıoğlu, 2011; Shih, 2013; Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Yakin & Tinmaz, 2015; Yu, Yuen, & Park, 2012).
However, most of these studies have not addressed in sufficient detail two main aspects: first, they do not provide a clear idea of the relationship between the applications in question and the educational process and, second, they generally focus on gains in motivation while leaving aside such issues as practicality or professional application. Thus, very few have served to provide a clear construct of the integration of Web 2.0 tools and social networks into the syllabus and they have hardly been presented as being a part of language instruction.

Earlier work done in ESP through Web 2.0 has evidenced a fragmented approach in that it has generally been limited to the use of e-portfolios as the main tool of evaluation. Cummins and Davesne (2009), for example, consider that e-portfolios are a valid alternative to computer-based testing and that the Common European Framework of Reference for languages and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages standards used in the United States can be integrated into them as part of the assessment process. Hung (2012) asserts that e-portfolios can have an additional positive effect on learning, “including building a community of practice, facilitating peer learning, enhancing learning of content knowledge, promoting professional development, and cultivating critical thinking” (Hung, 2012: 21) (see also Ayan & Seferoglu, 2011). Baturay and Daloglu (2010) also mention this interactive effect of e-portfolios. Other than mentions of e-portfolios, however, it is unusual to come across other Web 2.0 tools or social networks used for learning languages for specific purposes. Exceptions to this can be found in papers on the use of wikis or blogs (Li, Chu, Ki, & Woo, 2012) but the use of these applications resembles that of e-portfolios (Sindoni, 2009). At the same time, the researchers in these cases are mostly interested in cooperation or assessment processes rather than in the final output (Absalom & De Saint Leger, 2011; Alyousef & Picard, 2011).

In general, it has been observed that teachers who adopt a socio-constructivist approach in language teaching tend to use technology in their classes more in order to optimize the students’ learning potential, while teachers who merely use technology to enhance their curricula generally have teacher-directed instruction (Hermans, Tondeur, van Braak, & Valcke, 2008). For this reason, it may not be natural for the latter to integrate Web 2.0 tools in classes where the teacher includes computers in the instruction as a simple support for more traditional activities (Keren-Kolb, 2013; Whyte, 2011; Whyte & Alexander, 2014). At the same time, not all students may feel that social networking plays an important role in their future, either as students or as professionals, and as such, it may also be necessary to integrate the use of Web 2.0 tools and social networks within the student needs’ framework, at least, for educational purposes. These students do not show the same interest in using technology in different areas or in classes despite their access to it. Since Web 2.0 applications and social networks have tended to be used for leisure purposes, students may find it difficult to understand their place in language learning. Besides, although students usually have a wide experience in computer use in Spain, the inclusion of computers in the
foreign language classroom is rather limited. Students are not used to benefitting from them at home or in school either (García Laborda, Bejarano, & Simons, 2012).

Previous studies have indicated that students’ beliefs about content classes may be biased by their perception of the utility of computers in the given learning scenario (Lang, 2012). For example, students may have used technology to reproduce more traditional exercises such as multiple choice or matching type grammar exercises (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). As a consequence, their initial interest may be influenced by the importance given to the use of ICT or to the teacher’s approach to language teaching. Students are likely to reject the use of online applications if they do not consider them to be a good way of assessing their skills both holistically and specifically. Nevertheless, in general, students’ responses to the use of Web 2.0 technology and social networks seem to depend to a large extent on their ability to communicate with the appropriate applications rather than their familiarity or uneven capacity of knowledge of such Web 2.0 applications. In this changing and still unfamiliar context, it is important to observe different attitudes towards integration of Web 2.0 for language learning in the language classroom. In the future it will be interesting to determine whether motivation towards Web 2.0 is the main agent of acceptance or rejection of a language course (Isiguzel, 2014).

Despite the potential drawbacks mentioned above, consideration should be given to incorporating these tools into the classroom for a number of reasons and, in fact, García Laborda (2011) provides a taxonomy of Web 2.0 applications that can be relevant to instruction and alternative assessment in the classroom. For many young students Web 2.0 tools and social networks are a natural part of their lives, so they are used to interacting socially via Internet but not so much for academic purposes (Leis, 2014; Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012), but this trend is changing (García Laborda, Magal Royo, Litzler, & Giménez López, 2014). At the same time, the use of Web 2.0 tools tends to be available and thus people can have access to them. One reason is because they are usually free of cost. In fact, for Schrum and Levin (2009), Web 2.0 applications offer the freedom of use that other licensed software products do not. In addition, the applications are very intuitive and user-friendly. Since these tools serve for communication, they can also facilitate cooperative work when continuous communication is necessary (Breunig, 2016; Davidson, 2015; Okoro, Hausman, & Washington, 2012) in and out of the classroom (Magogwe, Ntereke, & Phetlhe, 2015; Vaughan, Nickle, Silovs, & Zimmer, 2011). Because students are currently working with some of these applications, it is possible to integrate them together on one project.

1.2. Implementing Web 2.0 for learning purposes: A methodological approach

When speaking about Web 2.0 tools in the foreign language classroom, we have found that many students complain that they do not have enough opportunities to
use them or any kind of guidance in using them on their own for language learning. As for teachers’ reactions, they may respond that, at least in Spain, they have very few opportunities to learn to use any software beyond the program already included with the textbook (Castro-Sanchez, del Castillo, Hortolano, & Rodriguez, 2009). At the same time, the regional authorities do not organize enough seminars, and when they are offered by private institutions, they tend to be expensive, yet Spanish teachers receive no additional salary or direct recognition for taking them; training is only partially recognized as it is part of a compendium of activities (Eurydice, n.d.).

In the particular case addressed in this article, the course integrated both formal and alternative activities for learning and assessment to determine student fulfillment of the course objectives. Formal assessment is associated with testing in the traditional sense of the word, while informal assessment is defined as “various types of assessment procedures that are seen as alternatives or complements to traditional standardized testing [...] thought to reflect real-life conditions [including] self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolios, learner diaries or journals” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 23). Blogs or other recording procedures can also be included within the assessment process at present. In the case of the course reported here, as in other courses worldwide intending to incorporate Web 2.0 tools in ESP (Levy & Hadar, 2010; Shih, 2013; Tunks, 2012; Yakin & Timmaz, 2015; Zasčerinska & Ahrens, 2010), the final grade was calculated through various means: 1) a personal evaluation (10%); 2) formal assessment – tests (40%); and 3) alternative assessment (50%). The alternative assessment part involved group work using the Web 2.0 tools considered by the professor to be beneficial to business students: a blog, a video tool (most chose YouTube), a presentations tool (SlideShare), and a professional networking program (LinkedIn). The tasks assigned using each tool were as follows:

- **Blog**: this tool served as to house the work created with all the other tools; the students wrote a piece of news on a business topic and extended commentaries on each of the 6 units in the course;
- **Videos (2)**: two five-minute reports related to the general topic of their blog were created;
- **Presentations**: the professor suggested business cases for the students to discuss ideally using voice and/or screen recorders (such as Screencast-o-matic).
- **LinkedIn**: the students created a professional profile in order to interact potentially with professionals in their field (as evidenced by contacts, visits, times visited and so on).

The students’ work on all of these projects was assessed by examining the student contributions in terms of grammar, vocabulary, appropriateness of language register, and pronunciation.
1.3. Research purpose and questions

Given this situation, the professor teaching the course felt that it was imperative to determine whether the students agreed with the authors of this paper in that Web 2.0 tools and social networks have great potential for learning and for alternative assessment. In other words, it would be determined whether these tools were seen as adequate forms of promoting students’ learning. As seen in the literature review, up to now very few studies have addressed the issue of language learning and assessment for specific purposes through Web 2.0 tools in language for specific purposes classes. If their use is valued by students, we might be in a better position to create more communicative classes and to observe how students develop their language skills through these tools. This change in assessment strategies could lead to more meaningful and motivating practices, as well as to specific ideas and strategies for teachers seeking better practices, ICT integration, and free, realistic and easy-to-access technology for their classes. This study was designed to address two questions:

1. What were the students’ attitudes towards using the Web 2.0 tools for informal assessment and learning?
2. Did they consider the tools used in this class to be adequate for their professional and linguistic interests?

2. METHOD

2.1. Procedure

This study is related to action research (Merriam, 1998), which is research carried out in real classroom situations and leads to innovation in that it enables adjustments to be made to the classroom syllabus and curriculum. This research used an exploratory design (Earl, 1989) due to a lack of similar previous research. The researcher used focused observation where the observation is supported by interviews or questionnaires to gain insights into the topic (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). Besides, action research is a genuine approach that has an immense value for pedagogical practice because it attempts to close the gap in the ‘theory and practice’ division and provide practical ideas that link theoretical research and in-classroom practice. Although scholars such as Dörnyei (2007) have questioned teachers’ capacity as researchers, Johnson and Golombek (2011: 51) assert that “SLTE [second language teacher education] is being shaped by the burgeoning area of teacher inquiry.”

The teaching process followed in the classroom has been reflected in previous publications (García Laborda, 2013), but the students’ reactions have not
been examined to date. The research followed a quantitative design to examine the attitudes of a group of first year Business English students. The data were collected through two different processes: 1) at the end of the semester the students met for a group session during the normal class hour to point out important matters (following Merriam’s (1998) directions for collecting observation data from interviews) in relation to the use, difficulties and opportunities for inclusion of Web 2.0 tools in the course, and 2) a questionnaire was delivered online (see Appendix). Process 1 was based on community-based participatory research (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008), while process 2 followed the model for questionnaires in action research (Dörnyei, 2007). The responses obtained during the focus group were recorded and used to prepare the questionnaire. Overall, the research process included the following steps:

a) Literature review and course design (before the course);
b) Course delivery (14 weeks) – Observation notes were taken;
c) Whole class session (process 1) – (90 minutes in length during week 15);
d) Questionnaire delivery (process 2) – about 30 minutes completed at home online with Google Drive (2 weeks after the course was over).

As indicated above, the initial data were obtained through a whole class session held two weeks before an in-depth questionnaire was answered online through Google Docs. The focus group, which was led by the main researcher, provided ideas related to the initial benefits and constraints to completing the student projects. The questionnaire was designed to determine student satisfaction with the course design using the Web 2.0 tools with a view towards improving the course for the following school year. The quantitative data from the questionnaire results have been analyzed using simple descriptive statistics but we also collected the students’ subjective thoughts.

Both processes were considered valid and reliable. By doing community-based participatory research, both the classroom situation and longer-term research would benefit because the teaching design would be improved and in turn the research design would also be improved. The possible bias involved in observations was clearly diminished by using a questionnaire, which the students answered anonymously online to reduce their temptation to provide responses that would please the professor. Double analysis of the questionnaire results was also considered but since the questions were considered clear and precise to answer an additional, outside reader was not deemed necessary. Besides, current research ethics require observers to be neutral in their analyses. In addition, the benefit of this research is the capacity to observe whether the responses of the questionnaire can be contrasted positively with what can be seen in class (Schmuck, 1997) and to provide a holistic perspective of the internal processes that occur in the classroom (DeWalt & DeWalt, 1998). This is best done by people
familiar with the situation. In other words, outsiders not known by the participants can upset the dynamics of the classroom situation and, hence, should be avoided (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Thus, this process was considered adequate for this research. Additionally, the researchers consider that the observations on motivation made below are objective because the original study focused on the capability of the students to use Web 2.0 tools and social networks, not motivation (Spradley, 1980).

In this study, the researchers were divided into two groups: external and internal. The internal researcher (also the professor of the class) planned the activities, led the whole-class discussion and suggested ways to obtain pertinent information. The outside researchers watched the recordings and analyzed the results of the whole-class session and the questionnaire responses. At all times there was continuous communication among them. The main researcher/professor also promoted reflective thinking about the students’ own learning throughout the entire course.

2.2. Participants

The 22 participants were all first-year students of English for Business at Universidad de Alcalá. This can be considered a limited size but because this class was no longer offered after the 2014-2015 academic year, the researchers have not been able to observe further classes. However, this sample was considered an acceptable number as this is a case study. There were 12 women and 10 men and all of them were regularly enrolled in the English for Business class at the university. The average age was 19.6 years old. The course was set up in an experimental fashion in order to cover needs that had been mentioned by students in the previous years, especially the use of technology in the language classroom and a focus on spoken language. All of them had had at least six years of general English study before attending college. A total of 54.5% had used computers in previous English classes in high school but mainly to view videos and for presentations. The other half of the students had not had any exposure to computers during their prior English classes, most probably because secondary schools in Spain often have only one or two computer laboratories for the entire school and not all the classrooms have a computer. In terms of their use of computers and the internet outside school, they mainly use synchronic communication applications as their main social tools for personal life, for example, Twitter (27.2%) and especially Tuenti (50%) but also Facebook (40.9%). They also use the computer and internet to look for information for their studies and to listen to music. They are avid users as they spend between 2 and 12 hours per day online, with the majority of them spending between 2 and 6 hours online per day. Nevertheless, when they responded to the questionnaire described below, they reported that they had not been aware of the course methodology using Web
2.0 tools when they signed up for it; instead they had registered simply because it was an English class. In this sense, motivation to use Web 2.0 tools was not the main agent of acceptance of the language course, at least during the registration period at the University.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, the survey (see Appendix) was designed to determine the students' satisfaction with the Web 2.0 tools and social networks used for the tasks and assessment in the Business English course and to explore any areas in which they felt changes should be made in the future. It was also interesting to observe the students' perceptions of the methodology using the tools in terms of their progress and application to English language learning and to see their view of the applicability of the programs for the professional setting.

3.1. Overall course design with Web 2.0 tools

In terms of their opinions about the tools used for learning and assessment and the course design overall, the focus group revealed that the students felt the class had been dynamic, entertaining and helpful. In the questionnaire (question 7a, Table 1), 68.2% of the respondents indicated that the applications/software were adequate; only 4.5% of them felt otherwise. In fact, only a third of the group (31.8%) would have used others (question 7b, Table 1), specifically Bahuven and E-book. At the same time, only 4.5% of the respondents indicated that they felt the applications/software were not interesting for the English class, while the other 95.5% of the class disagreed with the negative statement in the question 7f (Table 1).

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<th>Items (in the Appendix)</th>
<th>Options (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not answered</td>
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<tr>
<td>7a. The applications/software we used are adequate</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b. I would have used others (applications/ software) instead</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7c. I knew all of the applications/software before taking this class</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7d. I had used applications/software before in school</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7e. I think I got the most out of the applications/software</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>7f. The applications/software are not interesting for the English class</td>
<td>-</td>
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Table 1. Application use and preferences
The students’ positive view of the use of Web 2.0 for assessment was confirmed in question 2 because the majority of the participants (68.2%) indicated that the class should not be modified; their only complaint was the timetable, which was out of the professor’s control. When they were asked if they would have preferred a more traditional type of class (question 11), 81.9% of the students stated that they were against the idea; in other words, they were happy with the class design as it was. They also stated in the focus groups that they enjoyed the group work but wanted more listening activities.

3.2. Prior use of tools

According to question 12, the students’ main use of computers tends to be for social purposes. Half of them use Tuenti as their most frequent application (11 students mentioned it), followed by Facebook (9), Twitter (6) and Google Drive (3). These results indicate that the students opt for communication apps rather than other types that could facilitate individual development for their future professional careers. Nonetheless, nearly half of them (10) felt that this latter type of applications could be essential in their future in the business world.

It should be noted that the students overall were not familiar with the tools before enrolling in the course. Some 81.8% of the students indicated in the survey (questions 7c and 7d, Table 1) that they had not used them before taking the course and that they had not used them in high school either. In fact, only 9% of the students had used them in school before entering the university. The high percentage of students unfamiliar with the tools at the start of the university term means that most of them had to make an extra effort to become familiar with the programs in order to complete the required activities. This situation might be interpreted by some as a potential drawback with using Web 2.0 tools as part of a course. Nevertheless, the students appear to have been motivated to work with them, as confirmed in question 11; as many as 64% of the students responded that it was “worth the effort” to work with Web 2.0 tools in the class, as opposed to following a traditional English class that is more teacher focused.

3.3. Web 2.0 tools and English language learning

The students were also positive about the use of the Web 2.0 tools in terms of their progress in English language learning. On the questionnaire (question 1a), more than half the group (77.3%) indicated that they liked using the tools for learning the language (59.1% somewhat so; 18.2% very much so). The learning skill that they felt had benefitted most from use of the tools (question 3) was speaking (44.4%), followed by writing (33.3%), and then listening (22.2%). The high position of speaking in this list is probably due to the fact that the students were
using the tools in their groups during class time, so they needed to speak in English to coordinate together with each other. They also had to prepare and make two videos as well as give a presentation, all of which involve oral communication. Writing may have been well regarded because the blogs were open to all the members of each group and they provided ideas and specific written texts to address the topics of study. They also had to participate in LinkedIn, which required them to create a profile and write comments. Listening would have been ranked in third position again due to the need to communicate in class with classmates in completing their group tasks. It comes as no surprise that reading was ranked the lowest of the skills as the students’ use of the tools was mainly for production of work, as opposed to the gathering of information, the latter of which would have required more reading of information online.

3.4. Web 2.0 tools and the future profession

In terms of the students’ reactions to the Web 2.0 programs in regard to their learning to work in groups and with a view to their future as professionals, the students also tended to be positive. The entire group indicated that the methodology using the internet tools promoted cooperation among the class (question 6b; 59.1% agree, 40.9% strongly agree). Some 63.6% stated that they had worked well in their groups and 68.2% were comfortable using the programs with the Web 2.0 thanks to the help of their classmates. This result seems to outweigh their lack of prior knowledge of the programs. This positive reaction is confirmed by the responses of 77.3% of the class, who indicated that the use of tools benefitted their ability to learn to work as a team (question 3d). At the same time, 59.1% of the group answered that use of the tools benefitted them with a view to learning professional skills (question 3b). Finally, in question 9, they pointed out that they had learned a lot, not only in terms of learning the English language, but also regarding teamwork and the use of some applications that could be essential to know in the future.

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<th>Item (in the Appendix)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I did not like it at all</td>
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<tr>
<td>1a. The use of Web 2.0 benefitted language learning</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. In my professional skills</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. To communicate with friends</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d. To learn to work as a team</td>
<td>-</td>
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Table 2. Students’ satisfaction with the Web 2.0 applications used in class
In conclusion, the students appear to have a very positive impression of an English course that incorporates Web 2.0 applications and social networks because the programs can help them to learn English as well as learn about the applications themselves. At the same time, an understanding of tools can be beneficial to them as professionals who will often have to work in groups and will need to give presentations, network online and write reports. All of these results seem to outweigh the potential drawback of the students’ having to learn the new tools upon entering the course, a factor that must not be overlooked. Nevertheless, more work should be done to enable students to understand the professional use of these tools. At the same time, it might be interesting to expand the use of Web 2.0 programs to include others that students already know.

4. CONCLUSION

According to the results of this study, the students appeared to be highly motivated to use Web 2.0 tools in their foreign language classes. New technologies may also enhance their actual language learning but this possibility needs to be examined more closely in future studies (Heaney, 2012). Although motivation can trigger production, it still requires adequate revision in terms of language competence improvement and digital literacy in this case (Rusanganwa, 2013; Tragant, Thompson, & Victori, 2013). At the same time, since Web 2.0 applications are often intended for communication and information co-sharing (Anderson, 2007; DiNucci, 1999; Glassman & Kang, 2011; Goth, 2008; Peters, 2010), they also add a real use aspect to the academic activities done, as reflected in this research. There are, however, some aspects that need to be addressed, for instance, if the group work benefits all the students equally and whether assessment actually reflects the efforts of each of the students in the project. Another issue is if the use of technology is really more motivating than the desire to use the foreign language for communication purposes. A third question is whether the positive responses from the students were due to the novelty of the class itself. If this is the case, the usefulness of using Web 2.0 tools and social networks for language learning may be at stake. In brief, these three aspects should be approached in further studies.

As for this study, the research suggests that Web 2.0 is strongly linked to the students’ use of computers and their interest in communication. Since communication is precisely the final goal of language, the use of Web 2.0 tools and social networks for language communication is highly valued. The applications can have a strong effect on motivation and can be expected to improve or at least provide a way of viewing evidence of language competence. Still, their effects need to be addressed much further in future research. In this sense, future studies in social networking and language learning should consider the effect of software and hardware applications, including the opportunities provided by ubiquitous communication. The researchers intended to continue researching in this regard,
but the College of Business Administration cancelled the foreign language classes in 2015 making it impossible to do so in this setting.

References


Appendix

Survey questions

1. State your opinion about the following aspects of the use of Web 2.0 in the class (1-5 ranging from "I did not like it at all" to "I love it"):
   a. Language learning
   b. My professional skills
   c. Communication with my friends
   d. Learning to work as a team
2. Should something be changed?
3. Which learning skill do you feel has benefitted most from the use of Web 2.0? Speaking, writing, listening, reading?
4. Have you used computers in your English classes before? If so, what for?
5. Do you know any other programs that would have been of interest in the English class?
6. The working atmosphere in class:
   a. Has been good
   b. My classmates promoted good cooperation
   c. I could do fine with the Web 2.0 tasks because of my classmates
   d. We have worked smoothly in groups
7. The applications/software we used (rank 1-4 ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree")
   a. Are adequate
   b. I would have used others instead
   c. Which ones?
   d. I knew all of them before taking this class?
   e. I had used them before in school
   f. Which ones?
   g. I think I got the most out of them
   h. Which were the most useful?
   i. They are not interesting for the class.
8. When you registered for this class, did you know that you would be working with Web 2.0 applications?
9. Overall, what do you think about this experience?
10. On average, how many hours a day do you use the Internet? What for?
11. Would you have preferred a more traditional class? Was the effort to work with Web 2.0 worth it?
12. What other Web 2.0 applications do you use?