

Social Networks as Innovative Tools to Learn and Practise English: The Case of Facebook

The case of Students at the English Department of
the University of Mascara, Algeria

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Abstract

During the recent years, social networks have proliferated on the Internet and are becoming increasingly popular. They are achieving an unusual success especially among youth and also among professionals looking to expand their professional network. The social networks are indeed a great way to create new opportunities for their career. However, these social networks seem to hide another benefit rarely emphasized: they facilitate the learning of foreign languages, particularly English. Often criticized as being responsible for the impoverishment of language by the massive use of abbreviations and shortcuts of any kind, yet they prove to be effective additions to the language learning process. In fact being connected to one or more social networks involves being part of a virtual community the members of which speak various languages. The contributions of those different users transform the content of such social networks into

multilingual atmosphere where each user is constantly exposed to foreign languages. Sites such as “Facebook”, Twitter, Lang 8, My Happy Planet, Italki, Live Mocha and MySpace can indeed help people not only to learn a foreign language but also to regularly practice it. Social networks are so innovative ways to improve one’s English. The network Twitter, for instance, allows tracking news in foreign language on topics as broad as politics, economy, travel, new technology or even the weather. Tweets are limited to 140 characters; sentences are easily accessible and simple to remember. This allows acquiring vocabulary and common expressions specific to many daily life areas and memorizing sentence structures. Twitter users can also train to write concisely in any given foreign language especially English. Students all over the world are being addicted to such social networks. Our students at the University of Mascara make no exception to the rule, 08 out of 10 are members in different social networks. The most famous virtual community is no doubt the Facebook considering the high rate of students who possess Facebook account. Therefore, this little contribution aims to clarify the issues raised by the use of social networks for language learning and, more specifically, by the use of Facebook.

Introduction

In this era of globalization characterized by the huge development of science and technology, the English language has become a sort of a universal language or a major means of global communication. Today, no one can stand without being concerned with the use of English. That's why people all over the world are trying hard to learn such hegemonic language. The information technology has added a clear footprint to the language learning process. This new tendency lies at the heart of the present research. Non-English speakers are making great efforts to reach satisfactory communication skills. However, they are employing different sorts of methods and strategies to achieve the aim. Some of them go through some translation exercises. Others spend long time listening or watching English movies and music show. Other people go through accelerated English learning program in special language schools. However the great majority, today, is using the internet to get English, the online courses, the virtual schools, the social networks, and the chat rooms are few examples of hundreds of facilities, opportunities and techniques the web is providing people who wish to speak English. During the last few years, a chain of language learning social networks has popped up, and makes learning more pleasurable, effective, interactive and exciting than usual. The average language learner can now turn a hard

language exercise into something enjoyable by meeting and interacting with native language speakers and even language teachers from around the world through these language educational social networks.

To be a language teacher today is no longer that job of wearing a white pinafore standing in front of the learners, carrying chalk and using that famous black board. Being a teacher at the beginning of this new century implies that the teaching kit has been changed from the black board towards computer-based activities which are similarly approved as leisure activities in personal life. More precisely, digital spaces like chat rooms and virtual communities do not just set up a community, but also offer extra pedagogical chances and opportunities for both learners and teachers wishing to extend and enhance either their learning for the former or their teaching for the latter.

Unfortunately, at the University of Mascara in the west of Algeria, we do not have any interactive platform on the web which may permit real-time chatting between teachers and students. Yet, the students at the department of English in the University of Mascara are showing great desire and will to chat and to be members in different social networks such as the Facebook. They themselves admit that they have been practicing and learning English by communicating and surfing the

various websites and particularly the Facebook. Therefore, and as a researcher I feel a great force inciting me to identify and investigate the matter. Moreover, and each time I get to my Facebook account, plenty of students are there asking me plenty of questions about the lectures I presented. Besides, and surprisingly many silent inactive demotivated and slow learners are very talkative active motivated and enthusiastic on the Facebook pages. Consequently, the present research is an attempt to investigate and to check out two main questions: (1) Are our students really enhancing and fostering their English abilities through the use of such virtual communities? (2) To which extent may social networks be effective methods to teach and learn English?

The study

If the new generations are born into a world now largely computerized, this obviously does not imply that they possess innately skills and sufficient knowledge to use technology in school settings or in their private lives (Baron and Bruillard, 2008). Obviously, they need guidance to make a better use and to conceptualize the new online facilities put forward by such incredible web “Internet”. Thus, they may develop effective strategies to take full advantage.

Among the websites tools today available, Facebook, created by Mr. Zuckerberg in 2004 while studying at Harvard, is currently one of the most "popular" of social networks used by people all over the world. This contribution aims to clarify the issues raised by the use of social networks for language learning and, in particular, by the use of Facebook. We try to discuss in this article the advantages and limitations of the educational use of Facebook for learning foreign languages in higher education. So, in order to understand how chatting and interacting with an instructor or with a native speaker of the target language may lead to an effective learning of foreign languages mainly English in our case study, we will consider three points: 1) The context: the virtual communities, 2) Practicing English as a foreign language and learning its culture through virtual communities and 3) The teaching methods that might be used for virtual communities like Facebook.

The research question is related to the students' representations and reactions vis-à-vis Facebook: How do the students respond when using a social network during a language class? The researcher also attempts to decipher the issue of informal learning and the development of language skills through the processing and analysis of information. The investigation is an experimental study that took place at the University of Mascara in the west of Algeria during the academic year

2013-2014. The survey involved 100 second year students at the department of English. All in all, the present study is an attempt to consider how to exploit this Facebook usage for pedagogical purposes.

The research tools:

To set up the research, two tools have been used: a semi-structured questionnaire and online experimental written tests. The questionnaire includes two main sections: The first one was meant to gather data to characterize the population in terms of gender, level of proficiency in English, its familiarity with the use of Internet in general and social networks in particular, and so on. The second section was about the population's uses of Facebook and its opinion when it comes to designing Facebook as a pedagogical environment to improve the English language skills. One hundred students were invited to fill in the questionnaire.

On the other hand, the online experimental written tests were a kind of a remedial work or a feedback to be shared on the net. The researcher, as a written expression teacher, provided the students with an essay topic to be discussed inside the classroom. The students started brainstorming, planning and drafting the essay during the ordinary writing class. Later, they are invited to post their final versions of their written pieces on a Facebook wall created for that purpose. The students and the

teacher are to meet every week-end on this Facebook wall trying to comment and provide feedback about each other work. Therefore both the teacher and the students are active when it comes to correcting the essay. The auto-assessment is given another dimension. Most of the time many other foreign students and even teachers joined the web site sharing and enriching our discussions and interactions.

The analysis

The questionnaire's answers show significant familiarity of the students towards Facebook. All of them (100%) possess a Facebook account. Besides, most of them (98%) admitted to spend an average of more than two hours a day in front of their computers connecting to many social networks mainly the Facebook. The analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire also shows the positive impact of the educational use of Facebook on the learning community. The students reported that they are not only learning from their classmates and local teachers (90%) but also from other foreign students and teachers from all over the world (98%). Besides, they agreed that they felt comfortable posting publicly their thoughts and works on the Facebook pages. In addition, many students found that posting on the Facebook walls is so beneficial and useful (70%). Students seemed more committed to continuing their public communication

with others (83%). Few students (4%), however, responded that it is not always appropriate to accept automatically other students as "friends" .Thus; it is not always an easy task to post about personal experiences. The most significant detail that can be drawn from the students' answers is that all the informants believe strongly that the use of the Facebook is affecting positively their level of proficiency in English. Therefore, some of them suggested planning some online educational discussions or even lectures to gather students and teachers all over the world thus making the interactions richer and more effective. Some thought about creating some pages on which students are to publish their works, and teachers are to assess and to provide their feedback. Others mentioned the usefulness of planning some listening and speaking activities using the audio and video tools available on the Facebook options. Furthermore some informants proposed the use of Facebook inside the formal classroom context. The general trend shown by the questionnaires is indeed the positive attitude of the students towards the implementation of educational uses of Facebook.

On the other hand, the online experimental written tests or courses undertaken by the researcher have produced significant and unprecedented results. Previously the students have always shown a negative attitude toward writing, now; they are more active and show more

interest to writing not only on the net but also inside the ordinary writing class. The students feel great desire to participate and take part to the course especially on the net. Moreover, they have become so motivated to share their written pieces with others. They have adopted very positive attitudes towards the writing courses. The interactions inside the class and on the net have reached high levels. No student remains silent as he used to be. Furthermore a kind of competition is established among the students. Everyone tries to show the best of himself. To put it into a nutshell, the desire to learn has been multiplied in many students and has been implemented in many others with no desire before.

Nevertheless, it seems that some research questions remain unanswered, such as those concerning the extent to which both teachers and students are aware about conceptualizing and taking advantage of the Facebook tool. Moreover, the improvement of the learners' writing performances is not clearly assessed and evaluated through the device used. Finally, nothing is obvious about the quantity and quality of skills transferred through the Facebook interactions.

Pedagogical implications

The learning inefficiency is sometimes due to some psychological barriers. Students always feel frightened in a new learning situation. They always fear that they will:

make mistakes, be limited in their ability to learn, be unable to perform or simply fail. Moreover, some students are always shy and anxious thus they fear the teacher's reactions such as blaming and shouting or their classmates' reactions such as laughing or ridiculing. As a result those students may deprive themselves from an effective learning .Moreover they would never use the full mental powers that they have. In this case and according to Lozanov, such kind of students may be using only 5 – 10% of their mental capacity (Larsen-Freeman, 2000:73).

Language teaching is no longer that process of sender, message and receiver. It is interactional and communicative. It is a social process. It includes both cognitive and affective factors. It is interactional and communicative. It is a social process.It includes both cognitive and affective factors. On the Facebook, The students always establish a friendly relationship with their interlocutors.The students feel secure enough to take initiations. The atmosphere can be effective in reducing tension and fostering interaction. Students always get rid of many psychological barriers they encounter in the ordinary classroom environment. Students are whole persons affective and cognitive factors. Student learns to be independent, autonomous and initiator. Besides, relaxed reflection and thinking promote the process. Interaction among the peers (users

of the Facebook) leads to trust and less fear. On the Facebook culture and language are inseparable. The users form a community. The Facebook is an appropriate tool to learn vocabulary and conversation. Students' attention is off the form (structure) and on communication. Less attention is paid to Grammar and vocabulary. Errors are tolerated. In brief, Social Networks provide a bright and cheerful environment. Students on the facebook perceive much more than that to which they consciously attend.

It may seem so obvious that we can stimulate learning by creating a Facebook space, but it is important to remember that this can only be a complementary tool to classroom learning. Several options are available when using Facebook. We may publish links to improve the learning of the target language. Teachers may also set up a database which would always be available on the net at any moment and any place. It is possible to chat with the learner in order to discuss different teaching or learning matters.

Teaching through the social networks can today be a reality. According to the BBC the Celtic singer Fiona J Mackenzie is using "Twitter" to "teach" the Scottish Gaelic. She indeed post daily tweets containing vocabulary and publishes a weekly Gaelic songs with

lyrics and phonetics. She now has about 1,700 subscribers to her Twitter account.

The social network is therefore of a great help in learning foreign languages but is not necessarily substitute for the language course. This latter is indispensable for beginners or for those wishing to improve their English for professional purposes, for example. They can acquire basic grammatical rules which unfortunately are often neglected on the social networks. The ordinary language course is an essential step in learning any language. The practice and the understanding of such language can be facilitated and fostered by the use of social networks. The Facebook has now become a part of a daily routine of many individuals, whether teachers or learners. The greatest help that social networks are bringing to learning a language is the fact to be able to meet and interact with foreigners around the world. Moreover, some social networks have even specialized in these meetings as “lexxing.com site” that connect people with different mother tongues but sharing the same goal of learning a language.

Conclusion

There is nothing to hide under the sun. No one can deny that our students are enhancing their English through the use of internet and in particular through the use of the social networks. They are doing so because “Practice makes perfection”. The Facebook is providing the appropriate learning atmosphere that we as EFL teachers are failing to create inside our classrooms. Such atmosphere helps learners eliminate the feeling that they cannot be successful, or the negative association they may have toward studying and, thus, help them overcome the barriers to learning. “Learning through the Facebook” may be just an up-dated and a modern label to what Charles A. Curran has promoted many years ago by suggesting his approach “Community Language Learning”.

However, some teachers express a reticence vis-à-vis the use of social networks in general because it would make more difficult the separation of social relations from those of an academic nature (Schwartz, 2009). Therefore and before using the Facebook or any other social network in the language classroom, it is important to know the perfect tool to measure the potential benefits, potential drawbacks, and the moral responsibilities of online publishing and sharing. Before being considered as an educational form, Facebook, like all other social

digital networks must be deciphered in all its aspects and concepts. It is clear that we are still far from imagining an educational institution that considers Social Networks as part of its educational instruments. Yet, Facebook can be considered as an ideal platform to highlight a particular learning or training site.

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