

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES AS A TOOL FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE CASE OF FACEBOOK

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The advent of Web 2.0 brought about several new forums of social relations and interactions which take place now, predominantly, over the internet. Social Media, Social Network, Social Software, Social Networking Sites, among others, are expressions that seem to be used interchangeably to refer to sites such as Facebook or Twitter. All these expressions highlight the fact that the Web 2.0 concept is based around networks (and their underlying collaborative nature), software and media. Web 2.0 tools are ubiquitous: we use them to communicate, to work, and, increasingly, to learn and teach. This paper attempts to assess the potential uses of social network sites as support tools for the learning of foreign languages, namely of English, by presenting and listing particular didactic uses advertised of these Social Networking Sites, and, in particular, of Facebook, and providing a critical overview of current studies focusing on this area. Some of the recorded uses, include, but are not limited to: the use of Facebook as a class supporting tool, as an electronic portfolio repository, as the communication tool for a community of practice, and in conjunction with learning management systems (LMS).

Keywords: Social Network Sites. English Learning. Facebook.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are ubiquitous and pervasive in our everyday life: we use them when we communicate with friends and family, when we work, and increasingly– in a move to reflect the world we live in - when we learn and teach. In a teaching-learning context, these tools allow for many different opportunities for the creation of an effective and efficient web-based or web-supported learning environment, which revolves around the concepts of: information and content-sharing, content-creation by user, collaborative and cooperative efforts, constructive learner-learner and learner-teacher interactivity. This paper attempts to assess the potential uses of social network sites (with a special focus on Facebook) as support tools for the learning of foreign languages, namely of English, and is organized as follows: section 2 presents general concepts related to Web 2.0 to be discussed and clarified; section 3 highlights possible benefits and challenges placed by the use of SNSs in an educational context; section 4 showcases four examples pertaining to the use of SNSs in a language learning context, which are presented and assessed; and section 5 concludes the paper.

2 GENERAL CONCEPTS

In order to reflect upon it a field of research, it is foremost necessary to define the concepts that will be addressed with some precision. In this paper we opted to define “Web 2.0”, “Social Network”, “Social Networking Site”, in order to clarify the scope.

The term Web 2.0 - popularized by O’Reilly and Dougherty – has been defined by O’Reilly as “the network as platform, spanning all connected devices”, with Web 2.0 applications being tools that take advantage of that platform by “delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others” dubbing this an “architecture of participation”.

The advent of Web 2.0 brought about several new forums of social relations and interactions which take place now, predominantly, over the internet. Social Media, Social Software, Social Networking Sites, are expressions that are used interchangeably to refer to sites such as Facebook or Twitter, all highlighting the fact that Web 2.0 is based around networks (and an underlying collaborative nature), software and media. Although our immediate association of Social Network is with the internet-based version, the underlying concept - “a social structure made up of a set of social actors (such as individuals or organizations), sets of dyadic ties, and other social interactions between actors” (Wikipedia) - has been studied in the field of Social Sciences since the late 19th century, being firstly coined by Prof. John Barnes in 1954.

We adopt, in this paper, the expression “Social Network Sites” (SNSs) to represent websites such as e.g. Facebook and Twitter, among others, an championed by boyd & Ellison (2008) to define these web-based services which allow individuals to “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. This rather pointed definition was updated by the authors in 2013, to reflect the current massive emphasis on content of an SNS, defining it is a connected communication platform where users can: “have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users (...) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site”.

3 USING SNS FOR LANGUAGE PRACTICE AND LEARNING

Social Networking Sites allow for many different opportunities for the creation of an effective and efficient web-based learning environment, which revolves around the concepts of: information and content-sharing, content-creation by user, collaborative and cooperative efforts, constructive learner-learner and learner-teacher interactivity.

Lomicka & Lord (2016) organize the (current) types of SNSs as tools that, in a language learning context: 1) offer the opportunity to *engage in written discourse* (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter); 2) *focus primarily on oral discourse* (e.g. PodOMatic, VoiceThread or video messaging sites); 3) *highlight sharing of images* (e.g. Instagram, Pinterest or Snapchat).

In relation to 1), no extensive studies on the use of LinkedIn for language learning were found; several studies list Twitter's potential as a learning tool for (focused) writing skills; and FB appears to be the most researched SNSs, mostly focusing on Higher Education, and in developing writing skills. In relation to 2), several studies on the use of Skype, Podcasts and VoiceThread to develop oral proficiency were recorded. In what concerns 3), some studies noted Instagram's potential to develop oral skills (such as recording and watching short oral assignments), as "trigger" for written assignments and for developing vocabulary, while no extensive studies on the use of either Pinterest or Snapchat for language learning were found.

Whereas characteristics of these SNSs are relevant for the learning process of any subject, they are extremely valuable in a language learning scenario, since they provide a contextualized communicative environment where students are both expected and encouraged to interact with the target language (learning object) in the target language (as communication medium). SNSs can provide authentic language communication/ interaction which is what teachers actually strive for in a language class. A challenge for teachers remains how to use social networks both to enrich the learning process and enhance learning outcomes.

3.1. Possible benefits of the use of SNSs

Developing both foreign language skills as well as digital skills are among the key competences defined by the "Education and Training 2020" framework of the European Commission. Simplistically put, integrating both in language learning practice may be beneficial for their mutual development. But in what way(s) does the integration of SNSs – and in particular, FB - in the language learning process contribute directly to an improvement of the process itself or of its outcomes? When used in an educational context, it has been argued that SNSs can: promote a more active participation of students in the learning process (Schwarz, 2016; Ekoc, 2014), leading to a self-confidence (Kabilan, 2010) and self-esteem

(Gomes, 2014) boost; foster student-centered learning (Cerdà, 2011); promote collaborative learning (Gomes, 2014; Luo, 2013; Ekoc, 2014), and foster the creation of a learning community (Luo, 2013, Schwarz, 2016); establish better communication channels between students and with teacher (Gomes, 2014; Dogoriti, 2014); help develop learners' interpersonal intelligence, critical thought and autonomy (Schwarz, 2016); increase learners' motivation (Kabilan, 2010; Dogoriti, 2014; Ekoc, 2014); augment learners' performance (Luo, 2013); help develop a positive attitude towards learning (Kabilan, 2010; Buga, 2014) and promote affective learning (Luo, 2013); help students develop more responsibility in view of a larger audience SNSs offer (Yunus, 2012). The benefits that can be perceived when applying SNSs to English learning relate to the usage of English as the default language since SNSs are thought to specifically facilitate English language learning (Kabilan, 2010; Wang, 2012).

3.2. Possible difficulties of the use of SNSs

Some characteristics of Facebook, coupled with deep-rooted conceptions by both teachers and students may delay or endanger its adoption as learning tool. The following aspects (listed under categories proposed by Bartlett-Bragg, 2006) have been identified in literature as potential inhibitors of SNSs use in the teaching/learning process. In what concerns *organizational inhibitors*: technological infrastructure needed may not be available (Yunus, 2012; Bartlett-Bragg, 2006); some applications may be institutionally blocked (Branco, 2015); traditional curricula and assessment models may be considered incompatible with the informal learning fostered by SNSs (Bartlett-Bragg, 2006). In relation to *personal inhibitors*: learners (as well as teachers) are often worried about the issue visibility vs. privacy (Yunus, 2012); participants (mainly teachers) may not be technologically savvy/digitally literate or prepared to make use of SNSs (Yunus, 2012; Bartlett-Bragg, 2006); teachers might be feel uncomfortable in SNSs since these blur hierarchical distinction between teacher and student (Sandry, 2014); participants may not have or oppose to sign up for a SNS account (Sandry, 2014; Branco, 2015). In relation to *pedagogical inhibitors*, the inherent appeal and intrinsically social nature of SNSs is also a potential setback: they can be as interesting as distracting (Yunus, 2012; Luo, 2013); the informal character of SNSs may help promote closeness (Yunus, 2012; Kabilan, 2010) but may "blurr" the roles, promoting undue proximity between teachers and students. (Yunus, 2012); the use of SNSs can trigger "information overload" (Luo, 2013) or provide uncertain inaccurate online information (Yunus, 2012).

From a linguistic point of view, the perspective on the use of SNSs is twofold: it is argued that although SNSs promote writing skills, the type of writing is substantially different from

“academic” writing with emphasis being placed more on content than correction leading, for some authors, to a possible deterioration of the language (Wang, 2012, Mahmud, 2014), with other authors considering that it expands the contexts in which students apply language, leading them to adapt their utterances, thus enhancing their communication skills.

3.3. Challenges of the use of SNSs

Dealing with both advantages and constraints associated with the use of SNSs as learning tools is a delicate balancing act, requiring careful and thoughtful planning. It is worth pointing out that, in spite of the general advantages listed above, simply incorporating Web 2.0 based tools in the learning process alone does not necessarily make learners more autonomous or help develop their critical thinking – in fact clear instructions and teacher guidance are still necessary. Kabilan (2010) points out that, in order to make this inclusion meaningful and beneficial, the processes have to be well planned and the learning outcomes well defined: FB has to be used both as socialization and learning platform, and students need to be informed of the objectives of the project, the intended learning outcomes and how to identify them, and instructed what to do when learning occurs. The introduction of new technologies requires new pedagogies, new approaches and an updated teacher role. In fact, it is not enough to use SNSs for the sake of using them or similarly to any other type of resource: this process has to match the changing teaching paradigm (from one-to-many to collaborative). In this context, the teacher has to become more a facilitator than a “controller”, and his practices have to steer away from the traditional teacher-centered approach, with the student adopting a more proactive stance since he/she is taking on the co-responsibility for the process.

4 USES OF FACEBOOK IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: EXAMPLES

The most widely used SNS, both generally as in a language learning context is, undoubtedly, Facebook (FB), which allows the creation of a profiles (for individuals), pages (for companies and institutions, managed by an official representative), groups (which have as aim to foster discussion on a given subject) and communities. The four examples to be analyzed involve the creation or use of an existing profile for: direct interaction (4.1), interaction inside a closed group (4.2), a portfolio keeping-tool (4.3), or interaction in a community (4.4) in a foreign language learning scenario, which we feel represent the most common uses of Facebook.

4.1. Facebook Chat: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in conjunction with Learning Management System (LMS)

The first example of FB use in language learning is provided by Dogoriti (2014) who tries to assess attitudes and mindsets of students who used FB as an auxiliary learning platform in conjunction with Moodle as a Learning Management System (LMS) for the frequency of an online English Language Laboratory for two semesters. In the 1st semester, the students were taught solely via Moodle; in the 2nd semester they were able to make use of FB as a supplementary communication tool. A survey after each period allowed the authors to evaluate students' preference for and attitudes towards LMSs and SNSs. In relation to the Moodle questionnaire, the authors' findings were that while the majority (70%) of students agreed that the use of an online platform had been positive, only 2% had used the "chat" tool of Moodle, with 6% concurring they facilitated more active learning. In what concerns the Facebook questionnaire, a similar percentage (69%) indicated that FB enhanced the learning process, making classes more interesting (82%). When comparing the two fora, a staggering 90% expressed a preference for using FB for communication purposes rather than the discussion forum in Moodle but, interestingly enough, 90% have considered FB not to be an appropriate learning environment. Communication is facilitated through FB, not alone due to the fact that it is much more relatable to the students and has a degree of informality associated. We wonder though whether the exposure to two different "tools" simultaneously made the students perceive one as the formal (=academically relevant) and the other as the informal (merely academically interesting) and whether the questionnaire results reflect that.

4.2. Facebook Closed Group: class supporting tool

One of the most popular uses of FB in the language learning process is in the form of a closed group, usually associated with a language class/course. An important reason for this option lies with its features: in order to become members of the group, students and teachers do not need to technically become "friends", but remain "unfriended" participants of a common space, shielded both from the public eye and from participants' existing contacts.

Several authors have investigated the effects of using Facebook closed groups to facilitate the teaching of English (Peeters, 2015; Costa 2015; Ekoc, 2014; Yunus, 2011; Branco, 2014), with the most interesting studies to be those of Peeters and Branco, which differ in application but concur in research purpose: to evaluate the educational potential of FB in foreign language learning. Branco (2014) is particularly interesting because of the Portuguese context.

Branco (2014) created a FB closed group for English Learning with a 9th grade class, with the purpose of exploring the educational potential of SNSs and promoting English learning beyond the classroom. Given the size of the class (25 students), the weekly teaching hours and the curricular constraints, the author felt using a FB group could be beneficial by offering differentiated activities to meet the needs of different students. The author collected data on activity registered in the group's wall, drafted questionnaires and held semi-structured interviews, in order to understand the type of use given to the group by the students; identify opportunities and constraints; and understand self-perception of students on the advantages of the use of a FB group in their learning process and development of linguistic skills.

From analyzing the data collected from the group's wall, Branco concluded that, since this SNS is particularly related to reading and writing, these domains were mostly present in the different posts; oral understanding and interaction, though not directly discussed, were given attention by making available resources that can promote these capacities autonomously. The results of the questionnaires showed a very positive perception of FB use, with the possibility of accessing the group beyond the classroom boundaries/hours considered beneficial and compensatory. Interacting with colleagues was regarded as favorable, though students also remarked that FB can be distracting. The results of the interviews point once more to a favorable perception of FB: it has increased self-confidence, self-trust, interest and motivation for the subject, as well as understanding of and interaction in the target language. Branco points out, in her closing remarks, that SNSs use in an educational context occurs seldom in Portugal, due to a rather closed vision of their educational potential, which can only be changed through adequate training and an open debate with pedagogical structures. Also students will have to be trained to make use of tools and services in a responsible manner. Branco's description is by far the most complete exploratory case study we have come across regarding the use of Facebook (groups) in the English Learning context of a Portuguese school and the author's remarks and assessments are considered to be very pertinent.

4.3. Facebook as Portfolio repository: the F-Portfolio

In 2001, the Council of Europe launched the European Language Portfolio to “support the development of learner autonomy, plurilingualism and intercultural awareness and competence” and to allow “users to record their language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using languages”. But Portfolios - understood as the “purposively collection of the student's effort, progress and success (Demirel, 2015) - have long been present in the language learning context. Babbee (2012), Aydin (2014) and Demirel (2015)

summarize positive aspects of portfolio application by indicating that, *at the learning level*, they: allow teacher and student to jointly define objectives and evaluation format; showcase not only a finished product but a learning process; allow students to evaluate learning progress and increase involvement, assessing strengths and weaknesses; contribute to autonomy and critical thinking; support the development of lifelong learning skills; and contribute to an improvement in foreign language reading/writing, by exposing students to a higher number of authentic foreign reading materials in context.

The growing availability of digital media transposed the original hard copy to its electronic version (*E-portfolio*), with easy access via Web or other media. E-portfolios are easy to upgrade; can store multiple media, from writing samples, to oral interaction recordings; are flexible, allow easy sharing, recycling of entries in different formats for different contexts; and allow cross-referencing of student work through hyperlinks. Web 2.0 brought the *F-Portfolio* (FB based), which does not require particular software, is based on an environment recognizable to the students (no learning curve), and can be collaborative in nature.

Studies in relation to the use of FB as Portfolios repositories are limited in number and scope: Babae (2012) briefly evaluates the potential of some SNSs as hosts for Portfolios, mentioning FB as a suitable platform for promoting learning towards the “lifelong-learning ideal, user-managed open learning and collaborative learning”, which can take place in the learner’s own FB wall, instead of in a more formal and rigid portfolio structure. Aydin (2014) presents the most complete assessment of F-Portfolio usage found, with a sample group of 101 English as Foreign Language 1st-year students who, during a period of 24 weeks, used FB to record their writing samples. As positive reactions, Aydin reports that students perceive F-Portfolios as having “beneficial effects on expanding their writing vocabulary, grammar knowledge, research, reading and writing skills”. FB is seen to have a considerable effect on the way they write in English and can help a better expression of thoughts. However, students also report the F-Portfolio poses difficulties in providing feedback, revision, and studying with peers; with some describing the project as boring and time-consuming, stating “they can do what they do on Facebook equally as well writing with pen and paper”. As general conclusion, Aydin states that “students who spend more time on their F-Portfolio believe more strongly F-Portfolios change the way they write in English”, indicating “F-Portfolios do not present more problems than pen-and-paper portfolios, and it is to be expected that using Facebook as an entertainment and recreation environment will be more attractive for learners”. Aydin mentions this study’s limitations in the sense that it observes only students’ reactions, in a narrow EFL context, ignoring the teacher perspective. We would like to point

out though, that from this study alone, it is not clear which features make FB a more interesting Portfolio repository than other sites (blogs, dedicated Portfolio platforms, etc.).

4.4. Facebook Community: Non-Formal Language Learning

In the Facebook ecosystem, while the definition of “closed group” seems clear, the distinction between “public group” and “community” is somewhat blurred, as both are related to *interaction of members* regarding a *common interest*. A quick search for “English Learning” or “English Language Learning” returns a sizeable amount of closed groups, public groups and communities. Dimension does not seem to be the differentiating factor, since the search returns language learning communities with as few as 8.000 and as many as 175.000 members, while registering public groups with 22.000 members. The main difference seems to reside in the fact that a community can have different groups, and the main driver of a community appears to be the administrator. Given their “independence” and unrelatedness to specific language classes or courses, online language learning communities (LLCs) have been said to be promoters of an informal learning style. Ponte and Canelas (2013) analyzed the contributions of four different LLCs for non-formal learning. The authors consider the difference between formal (institutional, classroom-dominated, highly structured and certified) and informal learning (lifelong continuous process, where individuals acquire knowledge from experiences and daily activities; in most cases, incidental and not intentional), taking on the EC definition of an intermediate category – non-formal learning – a non-institutional, non-certified type of learning with a definite learning intention to acquire knowledge. Since these LLC appear to have been created with a specific purpose – promote English learning – the authors believe they fall under the category of non-formal learning.

Ponte & Canelas collected three elements for analysis: administrators posts, available resources and posts’ feedback, concluding: the category of resource made more frequently available in the analyzed LLCs is of the *multimedia* kind (predominantly text-image), followed by *video*; most of the recorded interactions occur in reaction to *multimedia* contents; the nature of the interaction varies from LLC to LLC, and is dependent on administrator’s strategy: more direct lines of questioning lead to direct replies (constructed answers), whereas open posting may lead to more diverse feedback (expression of personal opinions, agreement/disagreement, etc.). A conclusion postulated by the authors is that oral proficiency does not seem to be dealt with in all the studied LLCs. Since all LLCs are still active, we were able to observe that this tendency is still current. Also, from an “informal” observation of the referred communities, written proficiency may also come in short, since there is no promotion

of a sustained “dialogue” (the collaborative aspect is missing) and the element of self-production of content by users is rather limited. The authors also suggest that a lengthier study, to assess the evolution of the LLC in time would be interesting, as well as a shift of focus to allow an analysis of these LLCs from the perspective of the user, assessing contents made available by users and the amount of posts published by them. Such a study would definitely be valuable, though we consider that a full assessment of the true educational potential of LLCs cannot be complete without any form of evaluation of the learning, which was not the focus of the authors’ contribution but would be considered relevant.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The analyzed studies show that FB can be used in multiple ways in a language learning context, both inside and outside the classroom: among others, as a communicative tool, as a learning community, as an interactive record/progress keeper. When used in a language learning context, FB has potential to improve communication in and about target language. FB groups, in particular, emerge as a very interesting tool to broaden classroom activities, which may be more varied and are now more accessible, anytime, anywhere, though a word of caution has to be given regarding such a utilization: for younger age groups, the closer knit the group seems to be and the more focused the activities, the more potential it has to improve students learning processes; older learners, who are by definition more autonomous, can and probably prefer to regulate and manage interaction in such groups themselves but should nevertheless be informed of the pedagogical intention behind the creation of the group and of the learning goals that are to be achieved. Most studies seem to confirm FB potential to promote written proficiency but we believe oral proficiency should be developed as well, as FB groups could eventually be enriched with several apps to develop other skills currently undervalued/underdeveloped. Further research is needed on specific aspects of FB use, such as portfolio keeping in order to ascertain its advantages.

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