

FACEBOOK GROUPS AS A SUPPORTING TOOL FOR LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to present a review of Facebook group pages as an educational tool for language learning. One of the primary needs of foreign language learners is to gain the opportunity to use the target language outside the classroom practice. Social media communication provides occasions for learners to receive input and produce output while engaging in negotiation of meaning. In line with this point, teachers can instigate class group pages in the social media in an attempt to provide a space for practice and communication free of the traditional pedagogic concerns of a typical classroom. The distinctive discursive behaviour of Facebook group pages helps one to achieve that attempt. In light of these views, the researcher, in this study, formed a group page to understand the dynamics of social media environment as a supporting tool for language classrooms.

This paper addresses various features which make social media a unique place to contribute to the sense of class community and collaboration outside the classroom. The face-to face classroom is a controlled communication event, that is, teachers and students are required to be in the classroom at the same time but a teacher's use of Facebook is an attempt to communicate with students outside of that controlled environment where teachers can meet students in their territory. When compared to its disadvantages, the advantages of setting a class group page on the social media outweigh. Students can feel motivated to contribute to an online community if they subsequently receive support or help. It also leads students to feel that they are being supported by a whole portion of their class community and promotes students' desire to maintain a valued relationship with others. Students continue developing and strengthening relationships with others.

Keywords: Social media, facebook groups, digital literacies, language learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the world around us and, particularly, in the realm of communication, fundamental shifts are taking place. It is a fact that in everyday interaction, internet information and communication technologies have transformed conventional communicative practices and have enabled the emergence of new forms of communicative, cultural, expressive, and social activities.

Today, technology provides new potential channels for interaction. New ways of making meaning and emerging modes of communication and interaction known as 'new media' or 'digital literacies' suggest a significant change and demand fresh thinking about formal educational settings (Merchant, 2012). As Wodak (2011: 2) states; "we no longer communicate only in 'traditional' written and spoken genres, but also using new ones". In recent years, among those new communication tools, social network sites have been very popular amongst the youth and spending time on social networking sites appears to be part of most young adults' daily activities. More and more young people are interacting on those sites. Social media have radically transformed the nature of modern communication and introduced ways of interaction which, "fundamentally different from those found in other semiotic situations" (Crystal, 2001: 5).

Social media refer to a number of social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Foursquare, and Myspace, in addition video sharing sites like Youtube. They are virtual communities which allow people to connect and interact with each other on a particular subject or to just hang out together online (Doğruer et al., 2011). Generally, a social media platform provides their user a profile, a friend list, chat option and ability to send private or public message, create event, comment and get feedback etc. Different SNSs (social network sites) share many of those key features with one another; Facebook, which is of interest to this study, can be used for different purposes by users with differing interests and purposes; to cite a few: maintaining contact with friends, developing a network with other people around one, reuniting with old classmates or friends, meeting people with similar interests, networks for groups and organizations, sharing recent news about a person's life or getting the latest news, and so forth (Doğruer, et.al., 2011).

However, besides these sort of socialization purposes, consequently, more and more university teachers embrace the idea that it can also be used at an academic level and not just at a social level, and that it can be used for many different things/purposes connected to (formal) education (Grosbeck, et al., 2011). Although social network sites are not complete learning environments, they can be used for supporting learning, such as for promoting motivation, socialization, discussion and sharing resources on a subject. (Rachtam, et al., 2012; Walther & D'Addario, 2001) Therefore, more and more instructors are making use of Facebook groups to support learning outside their class hours and they instigate class group pages to continue interaction with/among their students.

REASONS TO USE FACEBOOK GROUPS AS A SUPPORTING TOOL OUTSIDE CLASSROOMS

Before the coming of the digital age, a motivated learner might have been able to listen to the BBC World Service, see a film in English and, if they could afford it, buy an English newspaper or book, but the teacher's role in the students' language learning was the key but now thanks to the Internet, a shift is happening in language learning and teachers embrace new roles. The development of information and communication technologies has resulted in the emergence of new kinds of academic genres and literacies.

In the past, learning environments were immediately associated with a physical location such as a school, library or classroom; however, with the proliferation of social media, or termed as digital media employed for content production and connection among individuals, electronically-mediated communication is finding increasing use and

recognition in teaching English as a foreign language. Facebook group pages are one of those electronically-mediated communication spaces. These are changing rhetorical spaces, in which students make repeated verbal and visual choices. Also, this kind of literacy helps language learners to understand not only what is acceptable in one context to another, but also what is expected of members who share a common communication space, they learn to construct and reconstruct their identities accordingly as the impromptu nature of new literacies is also an indication that it is emergent, taking place in a complex dynamic system.

Facebook group page interactions differ from formal classroom writings on many dimensions. Social media interactions are theoretically interesting environments in which to investigate L2 interaction, given that they combine the textuality of written communication with the real-time interactivity of face-to-face communication (Darhower, 2002). Text-based but speech-like interaction occurring via computers has generated a specific way of writing, which changes the traditional means and conventions of traditional written norms for the purposes of economical, compressed and fast-paced message production.

The unique linguistic and iconographic features of electronic writing comprise but are not limited to innovative abbreviation (acronyms, clippings, logograms, or letter-numeral hybrids and letter-morpheme substitutes, vowel deletion, etc.), emoticons, simplified syntax, non-normative capitalization and other characteristics (Averionava, 2012: 15-16). Classroom writing, on the other hand, can still be seen as an individual activity with mostly the teacher as the sole audience or sometimes done for peer checks. The classroom writing is thought to be principally made as a two-party accomplishment: the student as the writing party and the teacher as the assessing, correcting party, but the social media have become sites for reconstructing the previously established order between teacher and students by making informal interactions with peers. The new electronic medium allows for texts that do not fall neatly into any particular category. One remarkable feature of social media is the pervasive use of multimodal resources that involve both verbal and visual semiotic modes.

In Burn & Parker's (2003: 9) terms; "the word 'multimodality' is currently being used in the computing and telecommunications industries to refer to the way in which devices are moving away from a specialism in one mode to the use of several". As social media can present material in more than one modality; "it can provide learners with richer mental images, thus facilitating language learning" (Smith et al., 2003: 707).

From a social semiotic perspective, multimodal resources are deployed to enable dialogic engagement with each other. Social media provide the multimodal communication channels where students can communicate both synchronously (instant picture and video upload) and asynchronously (comments and wall posts).

With its multi-modal tools, they are highly dialogic with a potential for quick feedback. Using Facebook, people can easily interact and share multiple formats of information, including texts, pictures, videos, etc., with each other via diverse digital devices (e.g., smartphone) without temporal or spatial constraints. The wall allows the publication of announcements, which include hyperlinks, pictures and videos. The wall also allows participants to share resources and get feedback from others.

Another helpful feature of the wall is that whenever a discussion topic or a picture is created in the group, it automatically appears on the wall, which makes keeping track of the activities happened in the group convenient.

Interactions tend to be multimodal in that they rely upon visual as well as verbal modes, images and words work together to create meaning. Taken together, these elements of Facebook combine to allow its users to construct an image or identity to communicate to the greater online community.

Social media interactions can embody symmetry between the students and the teacher as the students are also active in shaping topics (Heritage, 2008: 237). Rather than a social order with a center of power, a teacher as the center of power in the classroom, in social media the relationships of power can become multiple and complex (Wildner-Bassett, 2005). Social media offer the altered power and authority distribution in contrast to conventional educational settings. In social media, the students are able to be more engaged in the learning process as active learners, team builders, collaborators, and discoverers.

The voluntary virtual atmosphere can encourage students to participate more actively and express their ideas. Furthermore, students take central roles in contributing and participating with one another, while the instructors simply take a supporting role in facilitating and guiding the overall learning process (Rachtam & Kaewkitipong & Firpo, 2012). They learn through joint engagement with each other through interactions. Working with one another provides valuable insights for the collaborators in terms of the processes involved in negotiating power relationships. Also, peer-centered communication gives opportunities to perform identities not traditionally associated with those of "student" in instructed institutional contexts.

In other words, students construct collaborative power relations within social media. It is indeed possible to discursively negotiate a more equal relationship in these kinds of social media interactions.

Apart from fostering sense of community, social media interactions can be seen to increase motivation among English language learners. Students' opportunities increase in the social media to claim identity positions that vary, differ or deviate from the traditional ones they adopt in face-to-face classroom discourse, with potential implications for language development. Students ask and answer questions, post information, and support one another for lessons. The interactions taking place in the social media environment contain easily accessible and potentially significant evidence of learning processes among the participants outside the classroom.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Taking the reviewed literature into consideration, the researcher formed a Facebook group page to see how active students could become on social media groups for academic purposes and how willing they were to respond to the questions initiated by the teacher or how willing they were to respond to the questions initiated by their peers or what kind of dynamics were evident in a social group page.

The context of the present study was the School of Foreign Languages at a state university in Istanbul, strongly identified with architectural and engineering education in Turkey. This study was conducted with the voluntary participation of foreign language preparatory school students (n=22, 13 male, 9 female students).

They were all monolingual Turkish students who were mostly at pre-intermediate level at the time of the study. 2 out of 24 students in the class list couldn't be a member of the group page as they didn't have a Facebook account. The researcher was also a member of the Facebook group she created to collect data from the students.

Data was collected from students' and instructor's posting messages and comments on the group page for a period of four months and covered sixteen teaching weeks in fall semester of 2011. Triangulation of data by means of observation notes, diary entries and memos assisted the researchers in identifying the students' reasons for the choices they made in their social media interaction. With the help of a software program (Jing) which helps to take screenshots of the screen pages, the researcher systematically archived exchanges between students from their various interactions on social media and stored in files on computer on daily and weekly basis. Hard copies of the interactions were printed and kept for later analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

For the preliminary analysis of the data, all the data were read through to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning and to understand what kind of themes emerged through interactions. During this process, students' interactions were analyzed by using qualitative techniques as qualitative research is mostly preferred by the researchers who do not set out to set hypotheses but rather observe what is present with their focus (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). In line with Strauss & Corbin (1990)'s systematic steps, through open coding, categories of information were generated. First, all the posts were read by coloring each instance. After identifying instances of experience, they were clustered into themes and categories which became apparent in the study. The main themes in the study context which emerged from the data in the social media are centered on the following aspects: daily issues, academic issues and cultural issues. When compared to the number of academic related posts, the social media environment enabled to share knowledge around daily topics.

These can be evaluated to understand the capability of this technology in breaking down social barriers.

Promoting online spaces may not always reap the outcomes that teachers initially set because we can predict neither students individual, culturally inscribed attitudes concerning technology nor decisions that they will consequently make in our classes. In this respect, as for the initial observations, although the degree of involvement showed a great variety from one student to another, some of the students exhibited an enjoyment of learning and extension in posts and were readily open to challenges and the prospect of being able to learn from each other and discuss different viewpoints about topics of common interests whereas some of the students were reluctant to share posts on the group page or comment on each other posts or show a signal of following the group page.

As it was not a course requirement and it was voluntary, some students were not willing to interact much. Although the aim was to create an informal discussion environment, it did not turn out to be so. Some continued to ignore the questions in the coming days. Some students did not feel compelled to comment on or acknowledge instructor's contributions. While interacting on social media appeared to be enjoyable to some students, others sat as nonparticipants, resisting the expectations imposed upon them. Some of the students mentioned during the class that they spent more time observing content on Facebook than actually posting content and for some of them, Facebook was used most often for social interaction, primarily with friends with whom they had a pre-established relationship offline, in their views, it is not a venue for them to interact with the teacher and also, it is difficult to disseminate content to their friends in English as their English was quite limited. Consequently, it was very rare for the participant researcher to get answers from the full group each time. Five participants were active almost all the time.

There was enthusiastic participation in some phases of the term with some students posting photos and links. The researcher's role in the group was the "moderator" and "participator" so most of the time she started the discussion by posing a question or sending a comment, elicited answers and encouraged participation whenever required. To establish a good rapport with the students and a stress free online environment, she also sent some fun videos, welcomed any kind of initiation by the students, "liked" their comments and sent some encouraging words at times and welcomed L1 use when necessary.

The topic being discussed also affected the extent to which learners engaged in negotiation. Some topics engaged students more and encouraged active engagement on the part of students and instructors alike. For instance; funny cartoons took most of the participants' attention. The comments for those humorous posts were intertwined with friendship and solidarity. They used intimate forms of address, built on each other's comments. By gaining more and more familiarity with the practices, some more learners became active participants in a new, emergent paradigm.

In addition, in some cases, the expectations of linguistic behavior and of established power relations between students and their teacher did not align with some students' established understanding of teacher/learner relations. The effects of power and status differentials within CMC (computer mediated communication) are not within the scope of this research but one can easily say that many of the exchanges consisted of students' initiations and responses, and seemed driven by the needs and interests of the students. This allowed students to interact with their peers and, in the process of interaction, to play complementary roles; sometimes they provided assistance and gave feedback; sometimes they received guidance and support. It brings about changes in power structures and knowledge construction. Students became more apt to share political cartoons, songs which emphasized social problems, inequality, unhappiness, poverty when they saw that their way of writing and sharing was being understood and appreciated by the instructor and his/her classmates.

They tried to exist as a whole in another language, but they also underline their learner identity. For example, students underlined the fact that they were students in the group page by warning each other to continue in English while commenting.

Students made use of adjectives such as 'great, magic, super' while commenting on the instructors' postings to show that they were getting involved. They made highly use of discursive elements of the virtual environments such as emoticons.

LIMITATIONS OF FACEBOOK GROUPS IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In line with the reviewed literature, this study also showed that social bonding and intimacy through computer-mediated communication requires time to mature. In turn, this process necessitates researchers to engage in longitudinal studies about the use of SNSs in order to acquire insights into this phenomenon. Care must be taken to ensure a continuously friendly group environment that fosters learning. This is therefore quite time-consuming and relies to some extent on the instructors' skills and personal characteristics. The more open and friendly the instructors are with the students, the more friendly and responsive they are likely to be in terms of the community atmosphere and system usage. Moreover, although Facebook is popular and widely used among the students, it should be noted that it is not developed specifically for learning and sharing in the classroom context

CONCLUSIONS

The reviewed literature illustrates a need for dimensional expansion of the research area of digital literacies in educational contexts as there is growing recognition that social media can be used as an educational environment to boost foreign language learning. It is taken for granted that a classroom provides a differentiated context with its own rules and roles and where the expected relations of participants are linked in codified ways. A classroom has students who are positioned in a complementary relationship with a teacher. Traditionally, there is a hierarchically organized relationship between teachers and students. On the other hand, social media provide a more free environment with its multi-modality tools and interactive environment. Social media interactions are more flexible in generating discussion on language learning, social issues and gives further opportunity to use the language interactively. Because of the multimodal and user-controlled nature of presentation and communication on the site, students choose what to share on the wall of the group page. Also, social media take the teacher out of his/her comfort zone, and forces him/her to develop a personal on-line experience since students are more active there. Social media create interactional and interpersonal spaces where knowledge is shared negotiated. Students' value connecting themselves to their class community outside the walls of language classrooms and as a result of their interactions with their peers and instructors, their connection to learning practices strengthen.

There are more and more educators who are embracing social media and advocating its use on and off campus for teaching, learning. As Markham (2008: 96) puts it; "the way one defines and frames the Internet influences how one interacts with Internet-based technologies as well as how one studies the Internet". As a teacher, one can choose to mark the Internet for educational purposes.

Therefore, more and more teachers started to view digital literacies as a part of foreign language teaching and they not only tolerate social networking in school but also encourage it for educational purposes. These changes also push education beyond the confines of school.

These shifts open up new spectrums for teachers and learners in line with poststructuralist view of the language learner-context relationship which allows for an expanded description of the learner as a participant rather than a recipient, as dynamic rather than stable, as active immediately in response to a context rather than a reactive (Norton, 2000).

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