



Facebook for the Language Class: Authentic Communication and Autonomous Learning

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Abstract

Could Facebook profitably change the Language class? After all, Facebook brings about genuine communication and motivation for interaction both of which language teachers hope to develop in their class. What features of the Social Network could improve language and literature learning? My research attempted to answer these questions and started in the fall of 2012 with a group of 6 graders. Our Facebook page is called Reading is important (in Romanian, Cititul e important). The page was set by the students with the declared goal to let friends know about what they do during the language class.

In the beginning the page was simply a project presentation virtual segment. The results of the reading activities were snapped and uploaded in order to obtain likes. Progressively the page became a factor of motivation: as the results are made public and likes can be counted, the projects need to be neatly done and presentations ought to be persuasive. Students become more and more autonomous: they are administrators of the page, they create their own online communication strategies which they later transfer in the class for common disciplinary or transdisciplinary learning.

A potentially boring activity like readings from canonic writers becomes a true communication adventure for the "zappiens" teens. Since iconic illustration is relevant in the digital space, the students develop attractive posters to summarize the main points of their interpretation and they upload them on the page. The image is associated with clear, well developed text so that it should become meaningful for the visitors. The more creative the text and poster, the more visitors and likes! The more transdisciplinary the approach, more opportunities to be read and understood by friends.

After two years with Facebook for the language class my conclusion is that, if well adjusted to the learning goals, the social network is far from producing distraction to the students. On the contrary. It can trigger more responsibility for study as well as the development of communication competences in a genuine and beloved setting.

1. Introduction

Is it meaningful to discuss about literature and reading books in this day and age when tablets, kindles, smartphones are common gadgets in the lives of the youth? Is literature reading still useful for busy people today? Does literature study hold any role in students' training? Do we need reflection, methodology revision when teachers blame ICT devices and students use them relentlessly and access with a touch their favourite apps during classes? Could young generations still receive the discourse on the intrinsic beauty of literature?

After an initial moment of questioning I attempted an analysis of recent studies that look into the impact of the new technologies on cognitive paradigms. From there, as a teacher of language and literature, I thought of using a fashionable ICT tool and see if the use of Facebook might help my students interest in reading as well as the corresponding competences. Then I designed and implemented a research project on the use of Facebook to improve reading. This started in the fall of 2012 with a group of 6 graders in a school in Bucharest. The Facebook activities are still on in that particular class today and are very effective. My paper will present the above mentioned steps.

2. Theoretical framework: Perspectives into the use of the new media

2.1 Superficial cognitive approaches

Educators are highly concerned by a perspective that has been presented by Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows* [2]. Based on research in various domains (neuroscience, psychology, sociology, sciences of education), the author claims that the use of the internet, which is considered the most powerful technology from the invention of the printed book, leads to significant changes in the structure and the function of the human mind. At cognitive level, these changes are translated by fast reading, superficial thinking and learning. Neural connections are fundamentally influenced by the internet environment that bombs the subject with repetitive, interactive, intensive and addictive stimuli. Online



reading changes human beings in simple information decoders. Subjects lose the ability to make rich mental connections that is trained by linear reading on paper, which is not distracted by other sources or tasks.

John Sweller who is quoted by Carr [2] explains the process of deep understanding by the involvement of long term and short term memory. A special type of short term memory is the working memory which sustains a cognitive load the learners are aware of. People are aware of the working memory and unaware of anything else. Consequently the depth of thinking is given by the ability to transfer items of information from the working memory into long term memory and to knit them into conceptual schemes that are further on activated in new contexts. In the internet era, one problem arises and explains the superficial mind: The working memory can retrieve and process a maximum of four items of information at a time. The intense and rapid impulses from the web media block the capacity to retrieve and transfer data.

2.2 Homo sapiens and homo zappiens

Veen and Vrakking [6], [7] discuss the transformations within the cognitive structures, as a result of the extensive use of ICT, from another perspective. The two Dutch authors oppose Carr's view and try to see the advantages of the new technologies as well as to look for possibilities to constructively apply these at school level.

In this respect, Veen and Vrakking introduce *homo zappiens* as opposed to *homo sapiens* in highlight the divergent learning path they take. Why is it relevant for school practice to look deeper into the two types? Children and youth have evolved towards a new way of learning thanks to their digital devices that they use extensively and from a very early age. As educators we need to reflect on the students' abilities and minds.

Homo sapiens favours linear and textual-based approaches whereas *homo zappiens* works with non-linear multi-channel ones. The first learns in isolation and is motivated by competition, the second is connected with other learners, is part of a community of learning and works collaboratively. *Homo sapiens* starts learning by making use of reading competences and works at conventional speed while *Homo zappiens* uses iconic entry points and sustains high processing speed. Last but not least, a very interesting antinomy in notices when the vector of learning is concerned. *Homo sapiens* tries to cognitively conquer the world, to know as much as possible from the world around. In this case learning occurs from the environment towards to subject. *Homo Zappiens* on the other hand projects his imagination towards the outer world. In this case learning takes place from the subject's intuitions and diverse scenarios towards the environment where they need to be tested.

The *sapiens* – *zappiens* opposition does not reflect the actual reality. The two types are discussed by Veen and Vrakking as faces of the cognitive process which oscillates between the two mental I structures. A teacher who is fundamentally *sapiens*, by school and academic training, can be contaminated during the interaction with a group of students who are fundamentally *zappiens*. The teacher's cognitive structures could be permeated by the students' representations. Likewise, the students use throughout their learning both *zappiens* and *sapiens*-type of abilities that they acquired in formal schooling and in nonformal education by the early use of digital devices.

What really matters is the teachers' awareness of the two paradigms and the willingness to create original concatenated models from the components of the two according to the needs of a specific group. It is important that teachers learn how to use ICT and *zappiens* habits of learning in order to create authentic learning contexts and to value what students can really do and not what they are supposed to do.

3. Methodology

While cautiously aware of the dangers highlighted by Carr, I decided to try an approach that looks for solutions of improvement in the language class by means of the new media. My choice has been supported by both the Veen & Vrakking perspective and the promotion of other ICT-based projects in Romania [1],[3],[4],[5]. My objective has been to find out if a thematic page on Facebook can support the students reading. My research methodology included: observation (of the students' involvement in the face-to-face tasks and the Facebook posts, their collaboration in dealing with various groupwork activities during class), analysis (of the students' reading and other communicative assignments as well as of their final uploaded projects).

4. Enhanced reading comprehension via the design and administration of a Facebook page

The adventure of shared readings on Facebook started in the fall of 2012, when one of my then 6 graders Irini Papandreu from *Alexandru Vlahuță* Highschool in Bucharest started a Facebook page for our mother tongue class with the intent of nicer project work presentations. The initial role of the teacher was to accept the students' proposals and also to warn them on two important issues: the teacher refuses to be among the page administrators if postings include writing mistakes; the teacher does not possess sophisticated digital competences.

The students chose the title (*Cititul e important*, in Eng.: *Reading is important*) in order to have two simple key words to ensure fast finding on Google: *We should be easily found so that we get likes and show we can read...* (Filip, student).

The page includes:

- a motto (Love for books is contagious. Is it viral on Facebook?) is important for how students view the promotion of reading and books (see Fig. 1);
- drawings, pictures that are adequate to our topic (see Fig. 1);



Fig. 1 – Printscreen for the Facebook page

- photos taken during groupwork that show the students' enthusiasm and involvement in getting the work well done;
- posters that result from teamwork, as an artefact of the reading projects ; they show the interpretation of the texts from a variety of perspectives and by means of diverse codes not only the verbal one (see Fig. 2) ;

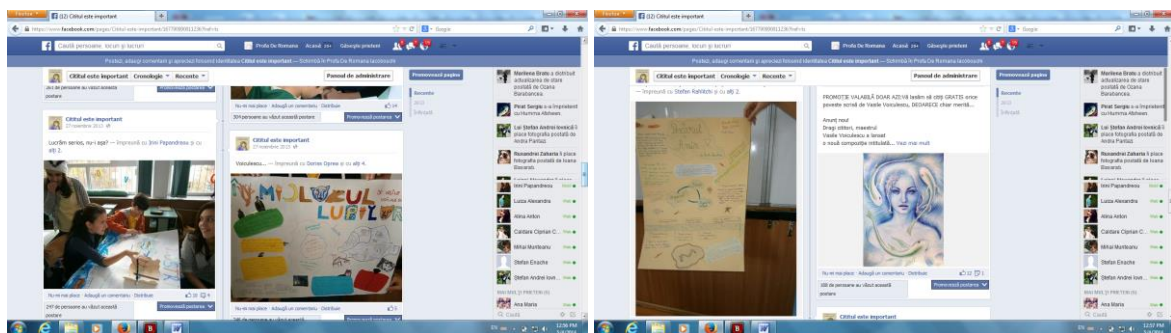


Fig. 2 – Posters that promote the result of the reading activities

- assignments that focus reflection and post-reading activities: students write comments which are from a cognitive point of view results of interpretation and critical thinking. The fact that the assignment is written on the internet, so it is public, demands extra care for both contents and form; in extra, it also touches to online discernment;
- pictures and posters uploaded by the teacher who promotes the activities that were carried out by the students – these show that students and teacher are partners throughout the learning process;
- photos that promote extracurricular activities, as a motivating extension for reading – Fig. 3 for instance shows the children at the International Book Fair Gaudeamus in Bucharest



Fig. 3 – Pictures with the children at the bookfair

4. Conclusions

In the beginning, *The Reading Is Important* Facebook page seemed a mere student initiative that corresponded to their need to be connected in a network, with vague – if any – implications for learning. With the time being, the page developed and promoted deep reading experiences on behalf of the students. In a nutshell, the advantages of page are the following:

- As shown in the observation grids, students have become increasingly involved in reading and in promoting reading experiences on the page ;
- The students' reading community is authentic and meaningful both for school life and the community : as a recognition of their reading abilities the students designed a questionnaire for the whole school that inquires about the reading interests;
- The assignments required text reading and re-reading and offered the opportunity to refer to various sources including the ones available online ;
- Before being posted, the assignments have been approached in small steps and explored the texts in personalized ways;
- The assignments have been made creatively by making use of more than a symbolic code, applying multiple representations [4] both in class and online;
- Students developed metacognitive abilities inspired by the online promotion of their reading experiences : for instance they developed colored flyers about their Facebook page that they disseminated at the Gaudeamus International Bookfair ;
- The posts show the students' involvement in their own learning. The Facebook page helped them understand that reading is not for the teacher, but for fun ; that reading is not a mandatory school activity but a genuine learning adventure that can be promoted online.



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