

The benefits of social networking for tertiary education language programmes for non-philology students

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Abstract

One of the effects of the omnipresent internet-based tools and means of communication today is the shift towards an Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC) [King et al, 2011], which links together people of various statuses and backgrounds from all over Europe (and the world). One such means of communication is social networks, which are increasingly being used to share news, communicate or exchange ideas. They are also becoming educational tools due to their popularity, relative ease of use and flexible nature. It is currently of great importance to establish the educational value of Web 2.0 tools and social networks and, simultaneously, to devise efficient ways to implement them in a variety of contexts from primary and secondary to tertiary level

Our initial work in this area involves experimenting with some Web 2.0 tools such as ARGs (Alternate Reality Games) including blogs and discussion forums for stimulating interest in and motivation to learn languages at secondary schools, developing learning and teacher training materials and their massive piloting with teachers and students from all over Europe (the Arguing for Multilingual Motivation in Web 2.0 project). Later, we started working on using social networks and social media in a) language teachers' continuous professional development and b) in language classes for non-philology university students (aPlaNet project). Some of the resulting language training strategies have been trialled out with around 90 students in Bachelor (Library and Information Sciences) and Master (European Projects Management) programmes in language development classes. Social media and social networks are introduced as tools in their English and related classes through specially designed individual and group tasks based on Pedagogy 2.0 models. Observation and analysis of student achievements and outcomes have shown that these activities contribute to better development of students' communicative competence in English, general fluency and enhanced written interaction in particular.

The paper outlines the opportunities arising from this pilot. Importantly the use of shared language activities promotes synergies between subjects, collaborative work between academic staff and students and willingness to cross borders between subjects taught. In particular the focus is on the specific opportunity arising from the characteristic of online learning to blur boundaries between formal and informal activities. The paper argues that the guided use of EMC tools in teaching of languages at tertiary level effectively leads to increased professional interaction and mobility.

Key words: Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC), language education, teaching and learning a language for specific professional purposes, Pedagogy web 2.0, communicative language competence.

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King, E., Lo Bianco, J., Stoicheva, M., Byrne, N., Djouadj, I. (2011) *Languages in Europe towards 2020*. London: TLC.

One of the effects of the omnipresent internet-based tools and means of communication today is the shift towards an Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC) [1], which links together people of various statuses and backgrounds from all over Europe (and the world). As David Crystal puts it, the Internet "is a linguistic revolution", talking of the effects the Internet has had on languages in general and the English language in particular, and that is why "a linguist cannot be but fascinated by it" [2]. The phenomenal speed and unpredictability of its development over the last 20 years poses questions about foreign language (FL) and English language teaching and learning in educational contexts. It is in no way surprising that educational policy, social policy, policy in general lag behind these unprecedented developments in the practice of global communication. Our baseline observation was that social networks, widely and increasingly used to share news, communicate or exchange ideas, are not coherently and efficiently integrated in foreign language teaching methodology or classroom work. However, they are becoming language acquisition tools due to their popularity, relative ease of

use and flexible nature. A distinctive feature of FL acquisition and learning today takes place in informal settings outside school. Use of language becomes highly volatile and creative and the Internet multilingual context also produces a whole new impetus for this informal learning. This turns social network use of language into a significant factor for achieving learning outcomes related to literacy and use of language in general. Our main question was how to incorporate social networking or its components in teaching and learning activities in formal educational context.

Our initial work in this area involved experimenting with some Web 2.0 tools such as ARGs (Alternate Reality Games) which include blogs and discussion forums for stimulating interest in learning languages at secondary schools, developing learning and teacher training materials and their massive piloting with teachers and students from all over Europe (the Arguing for Multilingual Motivation in Web 2.0 project). We had a specific focus on the age factor – EMC is the world of the young in particular. Prensky argues that there is a profound change in students’ (“digital natives”) and teachers’ (“digital aliens”) roles and student-teacher relationships, which are not confined within the walls of the classroom. Young people are generally better able to use digital tools than educators in general [4]. This, in turn, poses new requirements to the teaching content and the modes of delivery of this content. “Students’ digital competencies and ICT experiences outside the classroom” make it necessary for their teachers to “begin to change the way they plan their lessons, organise the learning activities and consider the use of resources so that the students are interested, active, positive to learning and motivated to develop in the particular subject area” [5]. Thus it is becoming a necessity to implement on a regular basis ICT in “non-IT” subjects such as languages [6].

The project envisaged the use of particular computer games - Alternate Reality Games (ARG) - entitled *Tower of Babel* (ARG ToB). The project developed an appropriate methodology for incorporating social Internet tools within language education and a teacher training course to help teachers learn and understand how they can use the Internet in similar ways to how their students are already using technology on a daily basis. It emphasized on a step-by step approach to the use of the ARG ToB with discrete elements and considerations for teachers, timing of the activity, appropriate context taking into account school environment, tips for using it as a class and out-of-class activity, specific roles of students, informal communication flow among teachers (Fig. 1) and advice on assessment of students’ work.

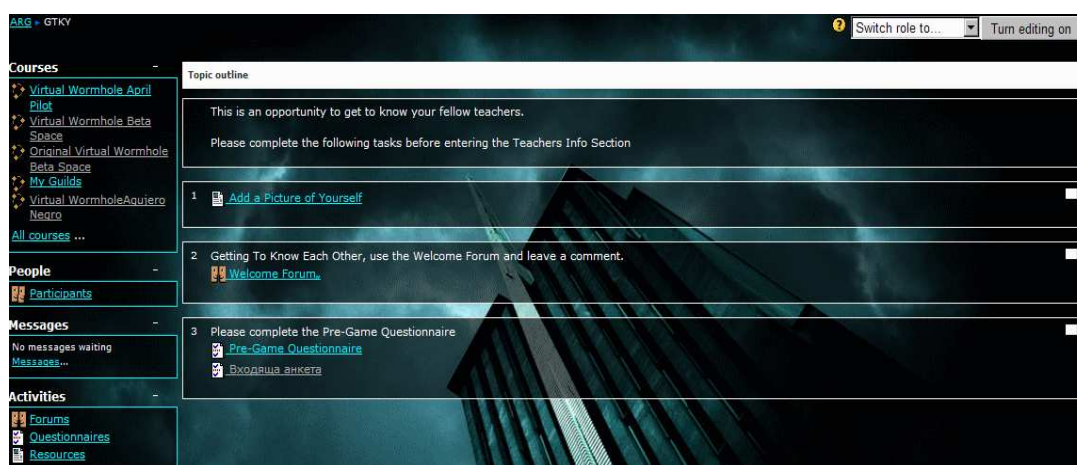


Fig. 1 Web 2.0 based training tasks for language teachers

The large scale pilot (328 students aged 13-16 and 95 teachers from 28 schools in 17 European countries) in the framework of the ARG project outlines the changed role of the teacher in terms of teaching, monitoring and assessing these type of activities. But it also clearly showed that there can be an overlap between these activities goals and the learning aims of FL teaching and learning, bringing to the fore the new developments as a result of the 'linguistic revolution'. Our observations and analysis clearly outlined the significance of teamwork and collaboration between teachers in a whole school policy for applying new technological solutions.

What was important for our further work was to establish the educational value of Web 2.0 tools and social networks and to devise efficient ways to implement them in a variety of contexts including the tertiary level. This is the main goal of our small-scale research experiment in the practice of implementing digital tools in language classes with non-philology students at Sofia University. We

started using social networks and social media in a) language teachers' continuous professional development and b) in language classes for non-philology university students (aPiNet project). The primary focus has until now been on involving teachers in social network types of activities with students. Unlike the previous example the recent experiment seeks to apply social networking directly into the teaching process as its significant, obligatory and measurable component and into the process of targeting specific learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are closely related to more than one subject taught and aim at achieving learning outcome synergies among two or three subject areas. The uniting element in these synergies was the language teaching and learning component (English at this stage of the experiment). For example, Library and Information Studies Bachelor Programme (LIS) offers English for specific purposes (the focus is on developing students' skills to communicate effectively in English in professional contexts) and communication and presentation skills in years one and two. The European Projects Management Master Programme (MA) offers a course on Project Terminology (in English), Partnership project development, Communication and media skills and Project management software. The experiment was designed in collaboration between the respective lecturers (2) for LIS and four for the MA students. Practically oriented subjects provided the best conditions for the experiment with their focus on team work.

The focus in experimenting with social networks was on developing students' communication skills. The number of students involved was 92 altogether - 39 LIS students in their second year and 53 master students of EU projects management. For the first group of students we used blogging as a means of developing students' writing skills [7]. A closed FaceBook group was created where the LIS students could exchange their initial ideas to be discussed and corrected if necessary by their peers and teacher before posting them to the group's blog (<http://bin2010.wordpress.com/>). We developed a set of tasks and procedures which match the Web 2.0 Pedagogical Framework (following Baxter et al (2011) [8]). For the master students a Google+ page was created. Social media and social networks were introduced as tools in students' English and related classes through specially designed individual and group tasks based on Pedagogy 2.0 models. The main stages we went through were instruction and explanation of the tasks; introduction to the social networks used; setting up the blogs, the FaceBook group and the Google+ pages; forming the groups and distributing the workload among group members; carrying out the task itself; posting the finished products in the blog and on the Google + page [7].

The following screenshots exemplify different aspects of the work done: setting the tasks (Fig. 2), students' reaction to them in a closed environment (Fig. 3) and teacher correction prior to the final post (Fig. 4). The classes took place once a week in a face-to-face format and the online tasks were carried out between face-to-face sessions.

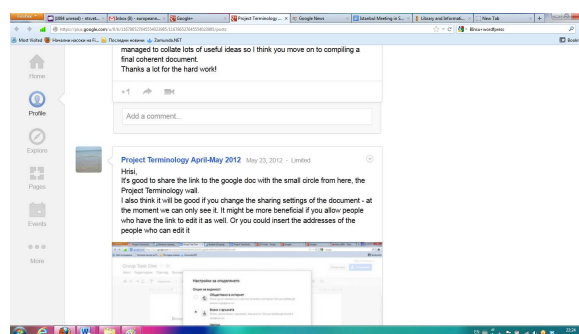


Fig. 2 the Google + page of the Project terminology course

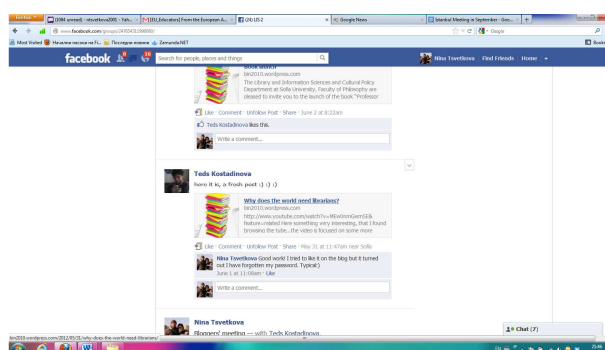


Fig. 3 The FaceBook page where LIS students exchanged ideas and comments with their teacher before the final blog post

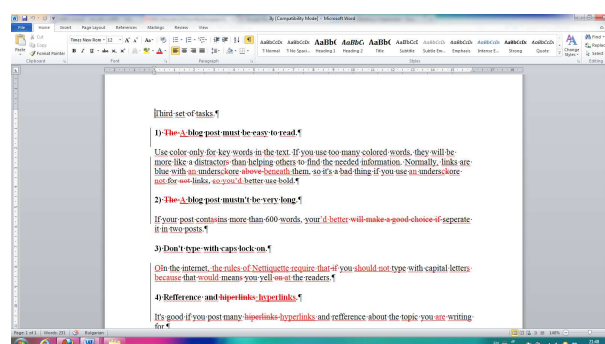


Fig 4 The process of refining students' posts

Some reluctance to post straight to the blog or the Google+ pages was noticed in the course of the work. Some students preferred the 'safe' mode of the closed FaceBook group and Google docs where they received feedback and subtle correction by the teacher. There was also a feeling of uncertainty as to the use of these familiar social networks for academic purposes.

Among the most important achievements of the experiment is the enhanced overall students' communicative competence in English. Despite their mixed level of English proficiency, all students actively participated as there was a clear communicative focus – to express an opinion on a specific topic related to their studies (i.e. using Web 2.0 for library purposes in the first case or presenting a project idea in the second) thus facilitating meaningful intra-group and inter-group communication. This was also beneficial to developing students' fluency in English. The students could also make immediate use of their teacher's advice and corrections in the initial versions of their posts to refine the language they used and achieve better accuracy and fluency. The individual posts were clearly referred to a specific earlier post which was signalled by appropriate phrases. There were clear signs that the guided use of EMC tools in teaching of languages at tertiary level effectively leads to increased professional interaction skills.

The electronic medium presents us with a channel which facilitates the students' ability to communicate. However, it also presents us with specific communication constraints related to the changed context of its use. Both seem fundamentally different from those found in other semiotic situations. Many of the expectations and practices which we associate with spoken and written language no longer obtain. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages provides scarce guidance into the sub-skills and scaling of written interaction that can foster task design and their interpretation as learning outcomes. There are few descriptors only related to overall written interaction, correspondence and partially to notes, messages and forms. However, it clearly points out its 'coming to play an ever more important life in the public, occupational, and *educational* domains [9]. There is a pressing need to further develop illustrative scales to facilitate the assessment process and the formulation of learning outcomes related to acquiring these new types of communicative language skills and practices.

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