

Use of Social Networks in Language Learning: Advantages And Disadvantages

¹Joan-Francesc Fondevila-Gascón, ²Eva Perea, ³Lluís Feliu-Roé

^{1,2}Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, ^{1,3} Escola Universitària Mediterrani (Universitat de Girona) & CECABLE (Spain)

epeream@uao.es, lluis.feliu@mediterrani.com, jfondevilag@uao.es

Abstract

The use of digital tools to improve education is a relatively recent but active study matter. In the Research Group about Digital Journalism and Broadband, in the Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, in Barcelona (Spain), we are analyzing, among other items, the use of social networks in the classroom for language learning, taking advantage of the online activities. In this article, we will analyze the theoretical framework of social networks and their links with education, putting emphasis on some recent cases of deviated use in Spain (the "Informer gate"). After it, we will develop a quantitative and qualitative methodology (triangulation). We will select a sample of college students (n = 73) used to include digital tools in the classroom (Moodle, online exercises, online exams, hypertext inclusion, streaming to document in the class), and, departing from these skills, we will ask them for aspects of social networks (focused on Facebook and Twitter) in a quantitative way (using Likert scales) and in a qualitative perspective (in-depth interviews) to improve language learning. Statistically, in a descriptive and a relational focus, we will try to find results to get the availability of the Internet and the social networks as a useful source to improve the approach to language learning. Observing the practical, social problems associated to the digitization of education, and with critical approach to the subject (relations of power professor-student, or even student-student, preserving the individual factor), we conclude that the inclusion of social networks as a tool with diverse possibilities in class is positive for language learning, although we will also find some dangers.

1. Theoretical framework

Our object of study¹ needs to combine two variables: the social networks and the use of it in the classroom to improve language learning. As leading social networks, we believe that Facebook and Twitter are the most ideal social networks to analyse the possibilities of interaction in a class environment. Interactivity, a single element of digital journalism, extends to all Internet activity and acquires particular importance on Facebook and Twitter.

The scientific analysis of social networks is relatively recent. We can define a social network as a set of online services that allows a user to build a public or semi-public profile within a limited system, creates a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and track the contact list, including those developed by other users in the system. The nomenclature of these connections often varies from one social network to another [1].

The multitude of existing social networks can establish different taxonomies. Direct social networks, i.e. those in which there is horizontal and equal conditions with information shared, may be, according to its purpose for leisure or professional use, and microblogging, according to the degree of private or public openness and depending on the level of integration, may be horizontal or vertical [2]. Following the above mentioned categories, Facebook is a network of leisure (although it is also growing professionally). Facebook is based on personal and public profiles, with a tendency of being horizontal. LinkedIn differs in its professional nature. Other direct social networks include YouTube, Wikipedia, hi5, Meetic, Xing, MySpace, Fotolog o Menéame. All these can be identified by their ubiquity.

Social networks can be managed (Facebook fan pages) by either non bidirectional, non-directed or reciprocated social relationships (Facebook friends, Twitter followers); they can also be explicit (users confirm the relationship: Facebook friendships, followers on Twitter) or implicit (the relationship is inferred by behaviour: comments on forums). At this point, we must stress the concept of a profile

¹ This research belongs to the Research Group about Digital Journalism and Broadband, CEU-Banco Santander-2012-13 Grants.

which forms the basis of social networking. Typically, the user of a network provides personal information and data in order to strengthen and increase their list of friendships through friends of friends. The depth and amplitude of users generated varies in density. The greater the concentration of contacts the user has, the more attractive they will be to 'e-commerce'.

2 Methodology

To analyze possible applications for language learning of the studied social networks (Facebook and Twitter) in the University, the Research Group about Digital Journalism and Broadband, in the Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, in Barcelona (Spain), have done a survey, in February of 2013, about the use of both social networks in the classroom, obtaining advantage of the online activities. Technology has shown these possibilities [3].

We have to consider, as a framework, the recent case in Spain "Informer gate" (at the beginning of 2013), pages in Facebook specialized on different centres (Universities, centres of Secondary School). These pages generated a plethora of injuries, annoyances and conflicts, including police actions to avoid intimacy attacks. Most of these pages were eliminated.

We have developed a quantitative and qualitative methodology (triangulation). The sample of college students ($n = 73$), non probabilistic and of convenience, included students of the first year in the subjects Computing and Communication Techniques and Marketing in the Escola Universitària Mediterrani (Universitat de Girona). We required a group of students with skills and acknowledgements about the Internet and, in general, social networks, and with the aim to use them in the future. This sample is used to include digital tools in the classroom (Moodle, online exercises, online exams, hypertext inclusion, streaming to document in the class). Considering these skills, we asked them for aspects of social networks (focused on Facebook and Twitter) in a quantitative way (using Likert scales) and in a qualitative perspective (in-depth interviews).

3. Results

The survey also asked about the use of social networks to find the desired objectives and aims (Table 1). Of the 73 respondents, all said they used Facebook, Twitter and other social networks to communicate. That is one of the foundations of the success of social networking: to meet the need for communication and interactivity. At this point we find positive signs for possible application of networks in the classroom. Other utilities, such as reporting or just browsing out of curiosity (serendipity, navigate from node to node without a specific destination, for the simple pleasure of browsing the Internet) accounts for a high percentage. However, reporting abuse of the networks by other users, companies or institutions is 15.06%. One argument could be the positive attitude of the respondents, which leads to the minimising of the impact of possible misuse of other users. In any case, it is not an insignificant figure, considering the youth of the members that are included in the sample.

Table 1: Reasons for the use of social networks

Objective	Percentage
Communication	100%
Information	94.52%
Out of curiosity	89.04%
To report misuse	15.06%

Own source

The dynamic use of digital tools to improve language learning in a university class is more or less active (Table 2). Thus, the virtual culture of it is regular for more than four out of five respondents. More than half stream content, and find links to the content teachers post on the forum or through means of online communication with students. Instead, around less than a third admit to having taken an exam online.

Table 2. The possibility of adding social network applications onto Moodle to improve language learning

Type of activity	Yes	No
Online exercises	82.19%	17.81%

Online exams	31.51%	68.49%
Hypertext	53.42%	46.58%
Streaming	57.53%	42.47%

Own source

At the time we used Facebook and Twitter in class for academic purposes (Table 3). Most respondents opted for the introduction of Twitter (46.58%) and Facebook (45.20%) in academia, albeit with some reluctance, to those who are unconvinced and think it foolish, to those with no answer. So, combining the entrepreneurial and innovative spirit, it is possible to introduce the two leading social networks into the classroom or teaching activities for language learning with caution and slightly reserved due to those who believe that they should not use or admit social media and have enough knowledge or sufficient criteria for this group of supporters or voted yes or those who voted no. This demonstrates maturity in terms of the results of the answers.

Table 3: The possibility of the use of Facebook and Twitter in class with academic purposes for language learning

Desire of use	Yes	No	Don't know, no answer
Facebook	45.20%	41.10%	13.70%
Twitter	46.58%	38.36%	15.06%

Own source

When we include the Likert scale on the assessment of the use of Facebook and Twitter in class for language learning (Table 4), we can see that Facebook is considered moderately positive (dominated by "average" and "good" as valuation, resulting in a positive outcome), whilst on Twitter the results were different (overall "average" and almost equal, the "good" and "very bad", resulting in an "average" outcome). On the Likert scale, Facebook gets better results than Twitter (3.11 versus 2.79 out of 5). The mean is 2.95, casting light and shadow on the use of these social networks in academia.

Table 4: The valuation of the use of Facebook and Twitter in class for language learning

Rating	Facebook	Twitter	Average
Very bad	15.07%	21.92%	18.50%
Bad	6.85%	15.07%	10.96%
Average	38.36%	32.87%	35.62%
Good	31.50%	21.92%	26.71%
Very good	8.22%	8.22%	8.22%

Own source

In qualitative terms (open-ended question about advantages and disadvantages of using social networks) Facebook and Twitter are observed with disparate positions when being introduced in the classroom. We have grouped the advantages into two categories: operational (operation of the course and class) and documentarian (structurally add value beyond the academia).

4. Conclusion

Facebook and Twitter are right for language learning. The quantitative and qualitative data of the survey conducted amongst university students reflect this. The primary use of social networks (led by Facebook and Twitter) is to communicate, learn and, curiously, to also to report misuse.

The possibility of the use of Twitter and Facebook in class for language learning has received approval by students who prove to be more active on Facebook than any microblogging network, despite there being very few differences between the two.

A similar phenomenon to what happened to business could happen in the university environment. Resources are invested in social media, however the strength and power of social media to build community, share knowledge, inform and generate debate is unknown. Our research shows an



apparent awareness of the advantages and disadvantages (especially the mixture of leisure and study, similar to that of business and leisure) of the introduction of such networks in the academic field. A large number of advantages have been considered by respondents, both operational and academic.

A study such as this requires further investigation for the evolution of the perception on the use of these social networks. Social networks, used in a practical way and in moderation, can provide an opportunity to the educational environment, allowing a focused exploitation, as in language learning. Social networks evolve, sometimes faster than society itself, hence there will be a need for an adjustment period to match the evolving social media environment with different sectors, such as the educational sector.

References

- [1] Boyd, Danah and Ellison, Nicole (2007). "Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship", Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.
- [2] ONTSI-Observatorio Nacional de las Telecomunicaciones y de la SI (2012). Las Redes Sociales en Internet. Madrid: ONTSI.
- [3] Fondevila Gascón, Joan Francesc & Carreras Alcalde, Marta (2010). La tecnologia com a eina al servei de l'educació: una visió humanitzadora. Barcelona: Universitat Abat Oliba CEU (Congreso "¿Una sociedad despersonalizada? Propuestas educativas").