

The Use of Facebook for Educational Purposes in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract—The objective of this study is to analyze the possibility of blending conventional instruction with online instruction via a social networking website, Facebook, in EFL classrooms in order to motivate students and improve their English language learning. Thus, this paper seeks to examine specific ways in which EFL teachers can use Facebook as an educational tool, describing the benefits of this technological instrument and analyzing the potential pitfalls and challenges that it could create. Besides, it includes practical strategies that teachers can apply in order to overcome these pitfalls and get the most out of this social network.

Index Terms—Facebook, social networking, technology in class, online education, EFL education

I. INTRODUCTION

“Students are constantly on social media. They don’t even pay attention to the classes. They are always chatting, posting pictures, and who knows what else! That network does not let students focus on what really matters!” These expressions show the feelings of many teachers around the world. The use of Facebook is a general concern among educators. However, no matter what adults think, social networking is still a mainstay in the lives of youths. Technology is an essential component of everyday life and “social networking is second nature to our students” (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012, p. 93). However, is there a way to use Facebook as an educational tool? Can it become an ally rather than an enemy? Educators have always found ways to reach their students, although the approach may seem scary and unfamiliar. Will teachers succeed this time?

The widespread use of technology in all areas of life has led to its growing presence in educational settings (Grgurovic, 2010). Nowadays, technology is an important resource used in many classrooms with the purpose of enhancing instruction. Actually, according to Picciano (2009), face-to-face and online activities should be integrated in the classroom in a planned and pedagogically valuable manner in order to support the students’ academic development. Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin (2010) also pointed out that “computer-mediated communication is one of the oldest yet still most valuable tool of network-based language teaching, as it puts learners in direct contact with others for authentic communication, and therefore, has positive outcomes for teaching and learning of English” (p. 181). That is why the objective of this study is to analyze the possibility of blending conventional instruction with online instruction via a social networking website, Facebook in EFL classrooms.

Most students in our society spend a great deal of their time outside school hours on social networking websites (Tan, Ng & Saw, 2010). Therefore, using Facebook to supplement classroom instruction seems to be aligned with the current trend. Additionally, as a result of globalization of digital media, English is now the predominant language of online communication among youngsters although it is not their native language (Crystal 2011; Seedhouse 2004). Thus, it can be beneficial to use this popular social network, Facebook, to support English language instruction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. Besides, blending conventional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities can contribute to solve teachers’ problem of inadequate class time, and can help teachers to make learning more appealing to the students (Manan, Alias & Pandian, 2012).

Evidently, this sociocultural perspective of learning has also several challenges and dangers that need to be considered. For example, some studies have shown that social networking has some risks such as: loss of privacy, bullying, harming contacts and more (Livingston & Brake, 2010). Therefore, this article will analyze all the pedagogical implications of using Facebook for educational purposes in English classrooms. First, it will describe the benefits of this social network. Then, it will examine the limitations and problems of this instructional perspective; and finally, it will discuss practical strategies that teachers can apply in order to overcome these pitfalls and get the most out of this social network.

II. FACEBOOK: AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Facebook is a popular website that allows users to interact and collaborate within a pre-defined virtual community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It is a social networking site and online communication tool that allows users to construct a public or private profile in order to connect and interact with people who are part of their extended social network. Facebook is the largest social networking site, with nearly a billion members, that allows people to make connections, share interests, and join groups (Lantz-Andersson, Vigmo & Bowen, 2013). It is so successful that the majority of high

school and university students use this site on a daily basis for both academic and social goals (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Wellens & Hooley, 2009). According to Wise et al. (2011), students spend an average of one hour per day on the site, especially to engage in social interactions. However, Facebook can have not only social applications but also academic uses.

Janice Petosky, an educator and researcher, said once: "Teachers have to find out where the students are, and work from there. Well, the students are on Facebook" (2014, p. 1). This is a reality, and teachers need to take advantage of it. Learning can take place anywhere as long as there are meaningful interactions between learners that lead to construct knowledge. Therefore, if teachers use Facebook effectively, many of the practices and experiences that occur in this social network can contribute to enhance learning. Actually, this can be considered a form of constructivism because it gives students the opportunity to work collaboratively, learn together and from each other, build learning communities, and construct knowledge through the interaction of members of these communities (Kabilan et al., 2010).

Facebook helps teachers to create significant and dynamic educational experiences, especially in language classes, because it allows students to carry out meaningful and authentic interactions with English native speakers (Garrison, & Kanuka, 2004). As a result, learners can improve their language skills, increase their motivation and confidence towards English, and develop cross-cultural understanding (Wenger, 1998). According to Godwin-Jones (2008), "tools and platforms such as Facebook are useful to improve communication, human interaction, and language learning" (p. 7). Actually, Facebook can be a practical tool to involve students in reading, writing, and many other EFL learning activities in a more incidental and informal manner. Research shows that even students prefer to use Facebook for some instructional activities like sharing multimedia or textual educational resources and interacting with other classmates in discussions and debates (Joinson, 2008; Pennington, 2009). That is why many teachers are using this social network for educational purposes in different classes, including English.

III. PRACTICAL USES OF FACEBOOK IN EFL CLASSROOMS

Although most teachers use Facebook for trivial activities like sending information to students who were absent or posting class announcements, this social network can be a practical tool for many other educational activities. For example, Facebook allows EFL teachers to start online discussions, post articles to develop a reading comprehension exercise, start online chats between students and English native speakers, and many other activities (Kabilan et al., 2010). Actually, the TeachThought Corporation published in 2012 an article with one hundred ideas on how to use Facebook for educational purposes. For instance, it mentioned that Facebook can be used to attend remote lectures and presentations from all around the world, play educational games like puzzles and crosswords, and participate in challenges posted by educational outlets. Additionally, this platform provides teachers effective tools to manage class projects and assignments (Kharbach, 2014). For example, it can be used to write reviews and reports of books assigned in class, follow journalists on social networks in order to gather past and current news clips relevant to classroom discussions in English, or host a regular English book club with the students.

Evidently, one of the main advantages of Facebook is that it allows people to share information, knowledge, and resources (Kabilan et al., 2010). In consequence, it can be used to import and share class blogs, post words and definitions for vocabulary review, share resources and materials for class projects, share ideas about class discussions in English, or post students' journals and share them with the class via a classroom page or group (TeachThought, 2012). Facebook can also be used as a space for collaboration and discussion (Kharbach, 2014). For example, it is possible to involve students in writing workshops with peer review and instructor oversight, encourage students to communicate through a Facebook discussion wall during class time, connect the classroom with speakers around the world in order to improve their foreign language skills, bring quiet students out of their shell by asking them to participate in Facebook discussions, create study groups to easily connect with each other within their own Facebook groups, track down old students or professionals that could come to the classroom as guest speakers, connect with classes all around the world, and discuss classroom ideas with other teachers on Facebook. All these ideas can contribute to improve students' English language skills.

Facebook also provides teachers access to valuable educational apps (Kharbach, 2014). For instance, "Booktag" can be used to share books in English and ask students to comment on them; "Knighthood" is a game app on Facebook that promotes reading skills in English; "Language Exchange" is an app that helps students to get connected with foreign language practice; and finally, "Flashcardlet" is an application used to create flash cards that students can study on Facebook to learn vocabulary words in English (TeachThought, 2012). In general, Facebook has many features that teachers can take advantage of. Actually, there are several studies that explain how teachers all around the world are using this network for educational purposes, especially in English language classrooms. For example, Manan, Alias, and Pandian (2012) mention that they successfully used Facebook in an ESL (English as a Second Language) environment to post announcements and give students a place to connect with each other and chat in English. They also reported that students were so engaged with this online resource that they continuously posted educational links they wanted to promote (Manan et al., 2012). Actually, Facebook has many possible uses such as asking and answering questions, posting information, and engaging students in reading and writing activities which are helpful to improve their English skills (Mills, 2009). Evidently, all these results can be transferred to EFL classrooms too. However, these are not the only authors that support the use of Facebook for EFL teaching. According to Northcote and Kendle (2001),

online games on Facebook can motivate learners to practice English. Tan, Ng, and Saw (2010) also use Facebook to blend conventional classroom teaching with online instruction with the participation of English native speakers. For instance, they implemented group chats and discussion groups on Facebook. In consequence, the reason why many educators, especially English instructors, are using Facebook in their classrooms is because it provides many benefits not only for students but also for teachers themselves.

IV. BENEFITS OF FACEBOOK FOR EFL CLASSROOMS

A. *Benefits for EFL Teachers*

Teachers can obtain many benefits from using Facebook. For example, it can help teachers to engage students outside the classroom (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011). Through this tool, instructors can also learn about trends and issues in EFL education as well as to obtain ideas for classroom practice. In fact, although Facebook is widely known as a digital means of communication, it is also a means for gathering information since it presents powerful professional resources for EFL educators (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010). Nevertheless, these are not the only benefits that Facebook provides teachers.

Many educational organizations like the International Reading Association (IRA), Reading Rockets (RR), and the National Education Association (NEA) create and publish Pages on Facebook to promote their organizations and share useful resources for educators (Kabilan et al., 2010). These pages usually include information about current trends and issues in EFL education, classroom resources, opportunities for professional development, and much more. Moreover, they give teachers the opportunity to collaborate with other EFL educators. Following educational organizations through Facebook is therefore “a way to access valuable information and resources at no expense and through an online medium that is likely being used anyway” (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011, p.28).

Teachers who follow EFL educational pages through Facebook obtain several benefits. For instance, they can get effective classroom resources for free, develop and maintain friendships and collegial or professional relationships for mutual benefit, and receive valuable educational information like notifications of journal publications, tips for teachers, and new books and e-books available for educators (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011). Therefore, Facebook provides many advantages for teachers all around the world, but they are not the only ones who obtain benefits from this platform.

B. *Benefits for EFL Students*

Facebook provides many advantages for students. For instance, it promotes human interaction and social interchange between participants (Mills, 2009) which “enhances communication and language learning” (Godwin-Jones, 2008, p. 7). In that way, Facebook can promote the development of the communicative competence in English language learners (Blattner and Fiori, 2009). Besides, several studies have demonstrated that using Facebook in EFL classrooms can help learners to improve their oral production as well as their writing and reading skills (Bosch, 2009; Madge et al., 2009; Naidu, 2005; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009). Therefore, this network has positive effects on students since it makes English language teaching and learning more practical, interactive, and holistic. For example, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) conducted a study with several university students from France and Germany. During the research, they observed that using Facebook to promote cooperative learning in EFL classrooms increased students’ learning.

Similarly, Blattner and Lomicka (2012) explored 24 American and French university students’ reactions to using Facebook in a language course (French and English). The overarching goal for the participating students was to learn English and communicate with other learners of English. Therefore, students were required to write postings and respond to others’ postings in English. As a result of this activity, students could improve their communication skills as well as their reading and writing abilities in English (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012). The truth is that online discussion has been found to be less threatening for many students. Stacey and Gerbie (2007) found that struggling learners who were not able to follow the fast-paced class discussion prefer online activities which they perceive are much easier to comprehend. They also found that students were more engaged during online activities as compared to face-to-face class activities, where only the more confident students would participate in the class dialogues (Stacey and Gerbie, 2007). Therefore, using Facebook can truly enhance students’ communication and interaction in the target language (Mills, 2009).

Facebook also provides students meaningful learning experiences that give them the opportunity to practice their language skills in a more incidental and informal manner (Grgurovic, 2010). This helps teachers to make connections between instructional and real-life tasks. In that way, students can use the skills learned in the classroom and apply them to real situations outside of class (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Manan et al. (2012) noticed that using Facebook to connect the theories and concepts learned in class to real life contexts is a good way to enhance students’ understanding. In their study, conducted with 535 adolescents of different EFL classrooms in Malaysia, they found out that Facebook was a powerful pedagogical tool that helped students to improve their English language skills. Although this study was conducted in an ESL environment, the results are also practical for EFL classrooms.

Students also have positive views and opinions regarding the use of Facebook as an educational tool to facilitate English language learning. For example, learners consider that Facebook provides opportunity for authentic interaction and communication that they have not experienced before. They also think that it increases confidence in language acquisition and sense of connectedness among themselves (Wang & Chen, 2007). Kabilan et al. (2010) also mention

that students enjoy using Facebook because it give them the opportunity to practice English with native speakers in a more natural and friendly environment. In fact, O'Hanion (2007) says that, when students have to talk to English native speakers, they feel forced to improve their language skills because they need to communicate with them in English. Therefore, their language abilities increase simply because they write, read, listen, and speak in English more. For example, Kabilan et al. (2010) points out that students can learn new vocabulary words through friends in Facebook because when their friends post comments using words that they don't understand, they feel motivated to refer to a dictionary and look up the meaning of those words. Similarly, those students who play games on Facebook feel forced to improve their English skills because those games require students to understand instructions in English and to interact with fellow gamers in English. All this demonstrates that people learn better in social settings like Facebook because they expose learners to authentic and relevant social interactions.

However, although Facebook provides many benefits for students and teachers, it also presents several challenges and dangers for those who do not use it wisely and responsibly. Thus, the next section will discuss several challenges implied in the use of Facebook.

V. CHALLENGES OF USING FACEBOOK IN CLASS

Simply adopting a technology and not truly understanding its potential will not suffice. If teachers do not try to learn more about the multiple uses of all these online tools like Facebook, it won't be possible to engage and motivate students because they are ahead of teachers in the use of technology (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012). However, this is not the only challenge that educators face. A second challenge is the distinction between entertainment and truly intellectual engagement. The nature of multimedia can captivate students easily, but this visual engagement does not necessarily represent intellectual engagement. In fact, too much multimedia stimulation can interfere with the deeper cognitive processing that is critical to learning (American Psychological Association, 2009). That is why teachers need to make sure that the activities they plan to develop using Facebook really help students to learn.

Another challenge that teachers face is that the preferred language used by most students to interact on Facebook is "Spanglish" (the combination of Spanish and English), or any other combination of languages according to each country. Very few students actually use Standard English to interact with each other. Thus, the quality of English used in the online interactions is very poor (Manan et al., 2012). That is why, in order to control this situation, teachers have to recommend and remind students that they have to revise their work before posting it on Facebook. It is also useful to require students to check their choice of words, spelling and sentence structures during their interactions on Facebook (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012).

On the other hand, there are also concerns that social networking "increases the likelihood of new risks to the self, such as the loss of privacy, bullying, harming contacts and more" (Livingston & Brake, 2010, p. 75). According to Huffman (2013), uninformed students and teachers can put themselves at risk by sharing the most innocent piece of information. Once information is released into cyberspace, it becomes a part of a global network. Persistence and search ability of content, replication and manipulation of content create a framework in which underage children are at risk (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Online bullying has gone global as well. That is why some schools prohibit the use of Facebook and internet on school. In this case the solution is professional development. Professional development is essential to training classroom teachers and students on both the benefits and risks associated with social networking (Huffman, 2013). Furthermore, collaboration and inclusion of all stakeholders is vital in order to develop appropriate activities and lessons, especially when Facebook will be used as an educational tool (Picciano, 2011).

Another issue that needs to be considered is the influence of having teachers as "friends" on Facebook. Although most students want to have their teachers as their friends on Facebook, some prefer not to do it because, as Jong et al. (2014) mention, some students have been affected by what they wrote on Facebook after adding their teachers as friends. Another problem is that the self-disclosure of instructors on Facebook could affect their credibility and the perception that students have of the teacher. That is why many authors suggest educators to create a different Facebook account just for professional and educational purposes (Huffman, 2013; Jong et al., 2014; Picciano, 2011).

Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) also analyze another challenge of using Facebook in the classroom. Generally, instructors are interested in the use of technology to augment student learning; however, at times, they have difficulty maintaining students' attention on class activities when Facebook activities are initiated. Conflicting evidence exists on the impact of Facebook on dedicated study time since some authors suggest that Facebook users spend less time studying and achieve lower academic results compared to Facebook non-users (Leveritt et al., 2012). For example, in a study conducted by Kirschner and Karpinski (2010), it was possible to observe that Facebook users had lower GPAs and spent fewer hours per week studying than nonusers. According to Fox, Rosen, and Crawford (2008), this usually happens because if a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing homework, he will suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if he just thought about the homework until he was done. Fortunately, this context is a little different in English classrooms because in EFL classrooms, the knowledge is constructed precisely by interaction and communication. Actually, students can practice English as they talk to their friends about topics that are interesting for them. The only thing that teachers need to consider is to give students the opportunity to have access to English native speakers in order to promote productive conversations in English.

Finally, it is also important to consider the learning preferences of students. Those learners who have a more rigid, stronger, traditional view of teaching and learning do not consider that Facebook can be an effective online environment to learn. For example, according to some students, to grasp and enhance the English language, it is necessary to have a more academic and formal structure (Manan et al., 2012). That is why teachers need to be balanced and try to adapt the classes to the needs and preferences of all students. They also have to be careful not to overuse Facebook or consider that this tool will replace face-to-face instruction and practice.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the information presented before, it is possible to conclude that Facebook can help teachers to blend online instruction with conventional face-to-face teaching successfully (Grgurovic, 2010). The advancement of the internet has created a borderless world. Thus, teaching and learning are no longer confined to the four walls of a classroom (Picciano, 2009). Therefore, EFL teachers need to be creative and up-to-date with the current technology in order to keep up with the fast-paced society. Thus, with careful planning, EFL teachers can utilize Facebook as a powerful instructional tool to engage students in meaningful language-based activities and to enhance the development of the communicative competence in language learners (Mills, 2009). Actually, if planned appropriately, Facebook can even facilitate the development of an online community of English language learners where students can practice their language skills through videoconferences and chats with English native speakers (Kabilan et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, educators also need to consider the pitfalls and challenges of this tool like the loss of privacy, bullying, harming contacts, and more (Livingston & Brake, 2010). It is not possible to ignore these dangers. That is why teachers need to address these concerns through planning. When teachers plan appropriately and wisely, they can maximize the benefits and minimize the pitfalls of this tool in order to transform the classroom into a safe, rich, and interactive environment (Huffman, 2013). Additionally, it is necessary to train students on both the benefits and risks associated with social networking in order to successfully incorporate Facebook into their academic lives because regardless of the pitfalls, social networking is still an essential component in the lives of youths (Picciano, 2011). Therefore, teachers have to make the effort to overcome the challenges and take advantage of the benefits that this technological tool provides. Nevertheless, it is still unclear if there are other technological tools that provide the same benefits as Facebook, but with less risk. Continued investigation of online education may provide further insight into these matters.

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