Chapter 38

Considerations for Online English Language Learning:
The Use of Facebook in Formal and Informal Settings in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the influence of Facebook (FB) in formal and informal learning in the language classroom. The theoretical framework of Web-based language teaching is first introduced. A selection of studies concerning the use of Social Networking Sites in the teaching of English (ELT) and conclusions drawn from the literature follow suit. The studies have been selected on the grounds of discussing students' engagement, motivation, collaboration, and communication through the use of SNS and, for the most part, Facebook in ELT. The studies also focus on the attitudes of higher education, foreign language learners towards FB, as well as the potential of FB as an academic teaching medium that may support other Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools like Learning Management Systems. The review of the studies indicates that Facebook may reinforce communication skills and engagement in the learning process and support participation and collaborative learning in formal learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

The application and integration of Networked technology is observed in higher education today. Network-based language teaching (NBLT) refers to the pedagogical use of computers connected in either local or global networks, allowing 'one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many' communication. NBLT research studies the relationship between learners, texts, media, and other speakers of the language in computer-mediated contexts of interaction (Kern, 2008).

Through the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web infinite learning opportunities are provided. Teaching and learning styles are changing, and the tools to accommodate these demands are changing, too. Similarly, Computer Mediated Social Networks have become part of people's lives and many users are higher education students. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in the form of asynchronous communication (ACMC), which includes email, discussion boards, blogs, wikis and synchronous communication (SCMC) such as chat and instant messenger, has transformed learning. The focus is on collaboration and communication. Web-based tools, such as blogs, wikis and online forums are recent add-ons to the field of educational technology with the aim of facilitating a shared learning environment. These tools form the basis of the current evolution of the Internet and are based on the premise that individuals derive their aptitudes from the connections they make (Siemens, 2004).

To date, the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) to learn a foreign language has not been adequately investigated, and the pedagogical suppositions behind their use must be studied (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Little is known about how online social networks such as Facebook can develop a sense of community in language classrooms or how they can impact the development of didactic practices in a language classroom. As far as language learning is concerned, it is not restricted to the four walls of the classroom; in fact, most language learning often occurs outside the classroom settings and does so informally. Informal learning, through network technology, is an alternative environment for language learning. As social networks are used by millions of users, most of whom are university students and adolescents, they have the potential to serve as a lifelong learning channel for teachers and students.

Many applications of SNS have been used informally by both learners and educators in higher education. Due to the presence of technologies for social networking, the current generation of young adults and university students tend to regard them as part of their way of life rather than as a new set of tools (Salaway & Caruso, 2007; Shier, 2005). The present chapter seeks to further explore the possible usage of SNS in EFL teaching in formal higher education settings. Moreover, the study aims to observe the utilization of this social tool in tandem with other ICT tools, such as LMS, with the goal to enhance students' engagement, motivation and communication. An attempt is made in this chapter to contribute to the on-going discussion about the possible educational usage of SNS in the teaching and learning of a foreign language in both formal and informal settings. Thus, an overview of the current status of educational online social networking for the teaching of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in higher education is provided in the following sections.

BACKGROUND

Facebook, being one of the most popular and widely used social networks among students, was chosen in this study to examine EFL learners' motivation, attitudes, engagement in the activities and learning performance in an online course. To investigate the potential of Facebook as an academic technological tool which may support other ICT tools, a review into the discussion of the possible uses of FB and SNS is conducted. To provide the foundations of the present chapter some background information to outline the challenges in the domain of online language teaching and learning and the use of FB in formal and informal settings in higher education is first briefly presented. Lastly, the chapter discusses the impact of FB integration in widely used e-learning web tools. It focuses mainly on the potential of Facebook as an academic teaching medium which may support other ICT tools like LMS. The current chapter is structured as follows:

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