

Did you 'Like' my Post?: Analysing Facebook in Language Learning

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Introduction

Social media occupies an increasingly important place in research in language learning (Cachia, 2008; McBride, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It fosters positive relationships among students and enhances the credibility of teachers engaged in contemporary student culture (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). This article attempts to situate Facebook (FB) in the broader area of computer mediated learning and within the specific area of computer assisted language learning.

The internet has had an incredible impact on learning in general including language learning. In the world of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), FB stands out for its unique value as a highly popular social networking site amongst the youth. In this paper, I will examine how FB impacts language learning. My research is based on the use of FB by undergraduate students of French over one academic year in Mumbai, India. Analysis of the research data allows us to understand how students perceive FB for learning, and proves that technology increases accessibility towards language learning generating a sense of comfort, disinhibiting language learners and creating scope for collaborative learning. Moreover, it promotes autonomous learning within a social environment different from the traditional one, while combining a socio-constructivist approach. While use of social media within institutional set-ups has its constraints, as a tool it has the potential to engage young learners meaningfully.

Scientific enquiry into the pedagogical virtues of FB is still in its nascent stages. In spite of that, one notes the existence of specially conceived applications for FB; some Open University courses and virtual learning platforms can also be accessed through FB. However FB's dimension of security and danger are all too known, which explains why FB is unwelcome in certain educational establishments. Despite these factors, the use of FB in pedagogical spheres is slowly on the rise. What are the benefits of FB as a learning tool? What is its pedagogical pertinence?

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites have been growing rapidly. According to Downes (2006), the emergence of new web technologies, such as Web 2.0, does not merely signify a technological revolution but rather a social metamorphosis.

FB allows its users to perform multiple tasks (Solomon and Schrum, 2007) such as mail, text, video chat, timeline posts, 'like', etc. In India, FB enjoys phenomenal popularity amongst the youth and the country is tipped to soon be the largest user of FB in the world (First Post, 2013).

Facebook as a Learning Tool

In recent years, there have been studies on FB as a tool for foreign language learning (Blattner & Fiori, 2009, 2011; McBride, 2009). Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, (2007) examined the impact of teacher self-disclosure via FB on student motivation and classroom climate. The authors

refer to the information about teachers that students have access to through their FB profiles, and the impact it could have on motivation and learning given that the teachers share a common platform on FB. Blattner and Fiori (2009) highlight FB's potential in providing positive gains in foreign language learning. McBride (2009) argues that the typical daily engagement of students with FB could be a motivating factor in generating pedagogically useful foreign language experiences. Karpati (2009) argues that Web 2.0 tools can, in general, help facilitate collaborative learning.

It is useful at this point, to highlight the difference between low-tech and high-tech use of technology. Low-tech use of technology refers to the use of basic applications of technology such as power point and simple tools, whilst high-tech use of technology refers to extended use of technology such as discussion fora and synchronous chats, which transforms learners' approach to learning (Windham, 2005). Ertmer (2005) shows that much of what takes place in the L2 classrooms is of the low-tech variety; high-tech applications in language learning shift the focus from the teacher to the learner and lean on socio-constructivist approaches. This calls for a modification of the teacher's pedagogical posture towards classroom methodologies. We shall look at the use of FB as a high-tech application for language learning.

Methodology

Twenty students of an undergraduate class of French in a university in Mumbai were involved in this exercise during one academic year from June 2012-April 2013. A group FB page was specifically created for these students with rules on mutual respect. They were encouraged to post reactions and interact with each other and the teacher on this page. Micro assignments

were likewise posted on FB. Student autonomy was also studied as students were expected at several junctures to search, identify, analyze and share resources on their own without the teacher's help. At the end of one year, students filled a questionnaire which was analyzed, along with the posts.

Surveys and Results

Students were asked if they were aware of the possibility of using FB for learning purposes before this experiment. Eighty five per cent responded that they had never thought FB could go beyond networking at a personal level. Another 81 per cent stated that they enjoyed posting, responding, submitting mini-assignments on FB and appreciated the convenience of brevity. They also liked supplementing posts with videos, audio links and web links as this allowed them the possibility of illustrating what they had written.

All students stated that they liked FB because they were used to it. Out of the group, 18 students logged on to it on a daily basis on their personal accounts, 4 logged on four times a week and 2 once a week.

Asked if FB had helped improve their vocabulary, 65 per cent responded affirmatively. Some 85 per cent responded by saying that they had watched videos, visited press websites and gathered information around French, which they would not have done otherwise. One student gave the example of watching the French parliamentary session on the bill legalizing same sex marriage saying,

“I would never have thought of watching French news, in fact, I didn't even think it was possible. I discovered a world of comic strips and cartoons and it was easy to understand. We learnt about the Roms and I found so much information on that subject.”

Out of the batch, 75 per cent stated that FB motivated them to voluntarily think of French outside the classroom. About 5 per cent said posting on FB boosted their confidence. One student declared:

“I do not feel very confident in the class. But on FB I feel I don’t have to worry. It’s like writing to your friends, everyone reads what everyone writes. I felt so happy when so many of my classmates clicked ‘Like’ for the video I had posted. There was a fun element which seemed to take away the fear and renewed motivation.”

Discussion

Renewed Paradigm

Bringing social media into the learning sphere coaxes learners to enter a known zone, but with a different function. The traditional teacher-oriented learning gives way to a learner-involved paradigm. The idea that the teacher is visibly in the “same space” gives psychological comfort to the learner, thereby strengthening positive attitudes towards the teacher (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007).

Giving Voice

FB is not just a mode of communication but also a marker of identity. Even the most socially timid and academically weak students found it a convenient tool to give voice to their views. The space was not dominated by the most vocal, as in a classroom. In fact, it proved to be an egalitarian mode of communication.

Student Initiated Activity and Learner Autonomy

Research has proved that using CALL-based activities initiated by the students themselves was

more motivating for them than those initiated by teachers (Warschauer, 1996). The students displayed an interest in the subject that went beyond the allotted projects such as sharing of French cartoons, French songs, etc. Learners also became more autonomous taking charge independently making decisions concerning their learning (Holec, 1981).

While an earlier experiment on blogging (Badrinathan, 2013) failed to have the desired impact, the experiment on Facebook succeeded in the sense that students used the medium frequently for learning. Although the context and learning traditions remained the same, FB as a tool seemed to have attracted a better response from the students.

“I connect to FB everyday, at least once. Now I connect for the sake of French.”

“I did not mind giving some time for this. I connect everyday to FB and now I feel I can express my thoughts in a few lines, share some videos that I like, its fun.”

Another positive result of this experiment was that discussion groups were initiated on FB through student initiatives without any teacher intervention. Errors in grammar were noted for discussion in the class. Additional information on the topics posted was offered by the teacher in class.

The possibility of choosing the topics to share and discuss made the activity more autonomous in nature and learner-centric. There was a transfer of responsibility from teacher to student. In such an environment, the students assumed new roles. They were at once contributor, reader, evaluator, facilitator; the very nature of FB empowered them to play these roles simultaneously. FB helped students negotiate their recreational space and learning space without much difficulty. That is what set this experiment apart from the earlier one (Badrinathan, 2013).

Error Perception

Facing and handling errors was relatively easier through FB, as was proved by this experiment. Students were less inhibited by errors than they would have been with traditionally submitted assignments. With traditionally submitted assignments, the emphasis is on the correctness of content; with FB the focus is less on marking errors than it is on the content itself. As Langer de Ramirez (2010) puts it, “Web 2.0 tools are forgiving of errors and provide students with ways to save face as they practice their new language in cyberspace.”

Melis and Weber (2003) distinguish between ‘technical usability’ and ‘pedagogical usability’, i.e. general usability of the tool versus usefulness for learning purposes. Facebook fulfills the former by virtue of being part of the regular e-routine for students. As far as its pedagogical usability goes, as we have seen, it allows for a fair advantage and shows some very encouraging routes. It allows us to move away from the typical classroom-based language learning that Kramersch (1985) defined as “institutionally asymmetric, non-negotiable, norm-referenced, and teacher-controlled discourse”. It also allows students to learn differently and become active actors in the learning process. That explains why more such activities involving similar tools are not just desirable but even necessary.

However, further research is required over longer durations to measure the effectiveness of FB for language learning. This research was conducted on an experimental basis in addition to a regular language learning class and expounds the benefit that the medium provides. Comparative study and evaluation of student performance using traditional and non traditional tools in order to measure efficacy though not taken into account in the present paper, can be the focus of another study.

Conclusion

This exercise proved that learners took positively to Facebook as a learning tool by combining their learning and recreational space with the specific objective of improving linguistic and cultural capital in the target language—in this case, French. We also recognize its motivational aspect as it created an environment that facilitated learner autonomy especially in the Indian teacher-driven context. Most importantly, it changed the monotony of ritual learning, and as Prensky (2006) notes, “it’s time for education leaders to raise their heads above the daily grind and observe the new landscape that’s emerging”. This, according to me is of particular relevance in the Indian context.

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