Foreign Language Learning (FLL) as Influenced by Social Media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

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Abstract:*At the turn of the past decade,researchers highlighted the promising role of the fast emerging forms of ICT, predicting its potential use in education. At the turn of the current decade, social software is here and is doubtless about to stay. In modern ambience, education has seen the new opportunities offered by the new technological model. With generations of 'digital natives', having technology at the core of their identity, and with the rapid development of social software technologies the building blocks of a new educational paradigm have been firmly laid providing a solid basis for the implementation of unprecedented pedagogies. The objective of this paper is to present potential academic uses of social media – Facebook, Twitter, andYouTube,eitheras the instruction or supporting tools, for augmenting students FLL competences. Comprehensive studies performed so far clearly suggest the huge potential of social media platforms for the development of students' receptive and productive FLL competences. In that line, this paper providesaliterature review of possible uses of YouTube videos inasocial networking context, touching on the advantagesofits use as well as current issues regarding the full implementation of Web 2.0 social software into the education system.*

Keywords:*Social media, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, FLL competences*

1. INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that the current decade has seen tremendous growth of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. These networking platforms are involved in a wider context known as Web 2.0 technologies [1] which presupposes a more social and participatory environment. Some of them are media-sharing websites such as YouTube and Vimeo, others, e.g. Facebook, are social networking websites, while Wikis, blogs, and microblogs (Twitter) are closely related to user-generating content being distinguished as user-producing environments [1].

Modern technological setting has influenced all areas of life with the Social Networking Software (SNS) becoming a ubiquity which can no longer be ignored in the realm of higher education. The internet is a huge repository of information wherein an enormous corpus of data can be seen as relevant from the scientific and academic standpoint therefore it stands to reason that academia should make use of affordances that social software tools provide for educational purposes. This particularly holds as students enter university with a "strong command of competences to communicate via Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools" [2]. On the other hand, literature also provides evidence of the unfavorable trend among faculty where the vast majority of teachers feel reluctant to enter this new digital setting preferably sticking to the wellestablished textbook-based teaching methods. In their study, Aijan and Hartshorne [3] investigated knowledge and perception of faculty concerning the Web 2.0 potentials for education. The results of their study suggest the existence of educators' awareness of advantages of the SNS tools over traditional teaching techniques however the main obstacle is the lack of interest of educators to adopt this new digital paradigm and incorporate it into the traditional academic classroom [4]. Twenty-first century students are fully aware of the advantages of the web 2.0 environment, and aptly expect to be technologically prepared to embrace new opportunities of the digital world after graduation. The fact places the oust on the academic community to observe these fast evolving trends and propose strategies for implementing ICT reality into the higher education system by fundamentally altering traditional learning and teaching pedagogies and transforming them to suit modern learning styles.

1.1. Web 2.0 Revolution

Establishing a new Web 2.0 paradigm presupposed the call to users to leave the passive position and

enter the public domain as content creators and contributors. This call was accepted by the vast majority of social media users, organizations as well as individuals, who have unawares turned the public sphere into a new structure which can afford ample and potentially effective opportunities to enhance students' learning in the university environment. This modern social media ambience involves immanent congruity which, by being transferred into the e-learning environment of academia, could transform higher education [5].

In the essence, the Web 2.0 revolution-based academic learning relies on students and their peers as active participants of knowledge creation who by employing the social networking tools change the flow of information from "unidirectional to multidirectional" [6] thus defining a novel Learning 2.0 paradigm [4]. In this user-created process, social media primarily ensure a psychologically favorable ambience – a more relaxed setting for students in which they learn and gain knowledge in a more leisurely style. Studies have shown that knowledge acquired in this manner is a real knowledge resulting from "deep student learning", according to Richardson, cited in [7]. A plethora of case studies reveals "multiple benefits for using social networking software, including retention, socialization, collaborative learning, student engagement, sense of control and ownership" [5].The sense of community closely linked to collaborative work is fundamental to successful learning along with students' motivation which has been reported to be the primary building block of successful social media interaction in an academic context.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA IN FLL – LITERATURE REVIEW

The Web 2.0 social software cannot be said to be learning environment *per se* – social networking sites are not explicit learning environments, but they could become an important learning support [2]. They cannot solve all learning problems [8] however they could be able to eliminate common barriers in FLL classroom and open up new perspectives.

Researchers report on the major impact of conversation-based interaction among second language learners [9]. Carmean and Haefner point up that real learning happens when it is social and student-centered [10]. In this line of thought, Waters highlights the fact that only in enjoyable surroundings, with minimal stress, 'meaningful understanding of material and content' [11] occurs. Other studies emphasize the value of discussion within social groups and the significance of learners' feedback during discussion for gaining confidence in communication. Discussing the effects of Facebook in educational settings, Schaffhauser observes the absence of constraints

among students in the communication [12], which helps them single out information relevant for conveying a message or opinion in the community. Positive effects on students' motivation to do exercises in online surroundings of Facebook, for example, were also considered [13]. In her study, Kroonenberg revealed that foreign language learners who lacked confidence in speaking in class were found to express themselves more freely in the social media environment [14]. Finally, social media reinforce the sense of community and collaboration which projects social networks as an alternative to traditional course management system [15]. The studies mentioned above are just a few going on in academia, a discussion which has begun to examine this new paradigm with increased scrutiny and formality [4].

3. DEVELOPING FLL COMPETENCES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

There is a burgeoning discussion going on about what social media tools can be integrated into higher education for building students' FLL competences. As not all social media can be successfully used for developing the entire set of FLL capacities, there have been a growing number of studies in recent years exploring how the different social networks can be effectively incorporated in the learning environment of higher education. Some social platforms are appropriate for augmenting receptive capacities – listening and reading, while others are useful for developing productive abilities – speaking and writing.

3.1. Facebook-based foreign language learning

Besides allowing the development of some FLL skills such as vocabulary extension, reading, summarizing or spelling, the primary field of Facebook application is its significance as a platform for developing collaborative work in which all the students – not only the ones proficient in a foreign language – are activated, given the pervasive notion that all members of the community are equally important.

As inferred above, Facebook is a very useful tool for improving interaction between teachers and students. The teacher creates a dedicated Facebook community and sets common learning objectives. In this environment, the learning process occurs beyond time and space constraints, which facilitates interaction involving multiple content exchanges, i.e. sharing files, videos, and texts among students. A more relaxed setting, 'innate' to students' digital nativity, makes them motivated to have more interaction without much concern about making mistakes, e.g. in spelling, focusing only on the assignment completion. A central topic assigned by the teacher should be diversified and involving multiple related topics

dedicated to each student individually. In this manner, a discussion and collaboration-based environment is provided wherein all students function as independent systems moving towards a common goal. With the individual objectives set, students strive to be as productive and collaborative as possible. Such atmosphere ensures learning through inquiry while knowledge gained in this manner guaranties long-term retention.

One aspect which calls for attention in the Facebook setting (but also in other social networking communities) is the role attributed to the teacher. The network structure might come in conflict with the hierarchic structure of traditional teacher-centered learning where the flow of content is typically one-directional [2]. Specifically, in a traditional classroom, the teacher is a primary guide, while in these new social surroundings they are expected to coordinate students' individual, pair, or group activities. In a social media environment, with the assignments set, it is of utmost importance that the teacher allows students to establish "their own rhythms and methods, keeping a close watch on them, without interfering and always ready to assist" [2].

Activities of teachers who tend to use social networking platforms only for conveying information are doomed to failure. Such educators could be said to have completely missed the target, overlooking the very nature of the social media context, and face the danger of being aptly recognized as 'digital immigrants' [16].

3.2. Twitter-based classroom

From its original goal of answering the question 'What's happening?' Twitter has evolved rapidly to discuss a wide array of topics. In the learning environment, Twitter has recently been incorporated to promote a fast exchange of ideas, brainstorming, or reflective thinking [17], which can be considered as Twitters central applications in the educational environment. Asin the case of Facebook, the key word describing Twitter's contribution to the learning process is the vast number of users participating simultaneously on the platform and the underlying sense of community.

One aspect of using Twitter for enhancing FLL competences that has been the focus of academic debate is the limitation of characters on sentence production [17]. This word constraint might be seen as a disadvantage of this social networking tool however some researchers consider this as Twitter's twofold strength. Firstly, short tweets, as the answers are called, are favorable from the aspect tpf peer reviewing, as students prefer reading shorter essays of other students [18]. Secondly, Twitter's character constraint requirement is an extraordinarily favorable feature for developing some important academic skills,

such as summarizing and note-taking. This particularly goes for students proficient in a foreign language. On the other hand, according to Ruiperez Garcia, Castrillo de Larreta-Azelain & García Cabrero cited in [19]. This brevity requirement can be discouraging for students with poor knowledge of a foreign language and contribute to their anxiousness in summarizing ideas within a constrained environment

Research into the Twitter's usefulness in education suggests its undisputable contribution as a learning tool however Wang and Vasquez propose that further research is needed to fully determine the pedagogical application of Twitter [20].

4. YOU TUBE AFFORDANCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Consensus exists as to YouTube as the most effective tool for both learning and teaching within different realms of science. With the ever increasing number of users visiting this social platform (2+ billion viewers) [21] and even more increasing amount of content uploaded daily (500 hours uploaded to YouTube every minute) [22], YouTube is the largest video portal and the second largest video search engine globally. Variety of videos covering all topics, posted both by individuals and institutions, represents more than a solid corpus of knowledge which can be used or referred to as both supporting and instruction tool in modern FLL classroom.

The reasons for teachers 'opting for this social networking tool are obvious and can be easily accounted for. In his research into multimedia and video clips, Berk [23] sees the potential effectiveness of video technology as a mode of instruction, as it arouses the senses in ways that other media cannot. Video can grab students' attention, create anticipation among them and increase memorized content, among other outcomes. The more senses are involved in the learning process the greater the reception of the content, which implies that contemporaneous usage of visual stimuli, written texts, sound effects, and dialogue seems to be the ultimate learning tool to stimulate the brain [24]. This phenomenon is in close correlation with Blended Learning and Information Processing Theories.

Garrison and Kanuka [25] describe blended learning as "thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences". This definition could be expanded to include the stance that the two segments present a complementary mixture [26].

The hypotheses put forward by the Information Processing Theory can also be applied in the case of YouTube and account for its popularity both among students and educators. Deffenbacher and Brown [27] argue that "to create a memory,

individuals are exposed to information via sensory input that is either visual (icon) or audio (echo). These initial pieces of information are only held in the sensory memory for a brief moment, unless the individual focuses attention to the stimulus and the object of interest is moved into the working memory. The working memory has a limited capacity, holding only pieces of information at a given time. If the individual maintains attention, the theory dictates that working memory will encode the information for storage in long-term memory. The long-term memory is an unlimited storage space in which one must recall or recognize information to bring it back into working memory for conscious awareness."

Considering aspects of cognition and information processing above, the key word is *attention*. Providing meaningful – and long-lasting learning requires 'attention grabber', thus any media representing a simultaneous blend of video, text, dialogue and audio stimuli is a promising tool for gaining real and long-term knowledge. This might be the answer to the question why educators most frequently, quite unawares, choose YouTube as an instruction or supporting tool in the classroom.

4.1. Enhancing FLL competences with YouTube

As a unique specificity of the 21st century culture that supplies limitless opportunities for maximizing the effectiveness of the FLL process, YouTube has encouraged a considerable number of teachers to adopt it as a teaching tool in their classrooms. YouTube is a viable option as a means of modeling strategies, providing additional context on education trends as well as assessing student learning through student-created videos [28].

YouTube is the essential social networking platform for developing the majority of FLL competences, both receptive and productive ones. In view of the fact that the incorporation of YouTube into the learning process is a relatively novel phenomenon, foreign language teachers still find its use rather challenging in the absence of a more comprehensive and institutionally established strategy for developing students' FLL competences.

YouTube enables the teacher to use its various supporting features within different segments of the teaching process. It can be used as a primary instruction tool, essential for the lesson organization or it can be applied as a supporting technique helping the teacher to place relevant information into the students' working memory before it is processed and recognized as knowledge. Finally, YouTube can be successfully used for recapping the learning material covered in the closing section of the lesson.

Research conducted so far imply that language learning skills can be effectively developed by the use of YouTube. Receptive competences, listening and reading, can be substantially boosted in video-rich YouTube environment. Developing *listening* needs to be teacher-guided, both in respect of the selection of appropriate videos and the learning material, usually created and organized by the teacher. This is due to the fact that YouTube abounds in videos considered irrelevant from an academic standpoint. They might be unreliable in respect of the video content, non-academic vocabulary (containing slang), or poor pronunciation of the speaker. Having reservations about video content and quality, some teachers feel more comfortable to use an official educational channel on YouTube [28]. *Reading* can be activated simultaneously with listening given the transcript provided in almost all video clips on YouTube as well as via reading viewers comments, especially in videos created and 'consumed' by academic/scientific community. Especially beneficial video clips aimed at augmenting students' listening and reading competences are TED talks which always come with transcript [28]. Activation of transcripts can be constructive, especially when a speaker presents too quickly or unintelligibly, which is usually frustrating for students with poor command of a foreign language. Productive competences – speaking and writing, based on actual knowledge, require the foreign language teacher's involvement in particular. Developing *writing* necessitates teacher's and students' full commitment due to the complex nature of writing skills and their acquisition. Using YouTube for developing writing competences cannot be reduced to writing comments on a YouTube portal – commenting is a good platform for exercising the knowledge already existing. Students proficient in a foreign language can, however, gain good results in individual efforts to develop their writing skills via YouTube, given the multitude of YouTube video clips on this topic.

As for enhancing *speaking* via YouTube, it usually relies on discussions in class within a projected thematic frame typically organized by the teacher. In regards to developing this language competence, one aspect needs to be particularly observed in the YouTube ambience. The leisurely style which a video context essentially ensures, promotes both students' and teachers' confidence. Be it an instruction or a supporting tool in the teaching process, YouTube videos add to the dynamics of the lecture by stimulating discussion in class. Studies have shown that even students that lack confidence due to the poor knowledge of a foreign language (and rather choose to listen in a traditionally-based class), are instigated to speak their minds in video-based classes. As remarked earlier in the paper, discussion is triggered among the majority of students whenever there is a keen sense of community – "real learning happens when it is social and students centered" [30]

Given the fact that pronunciation is of ultimate significance in developing speaking competences another aspect to be noted within the context of enhancing speaking is the teacher's careful selection of videos that feature native speakers.

Besides major language competences addressed above some other skills can additionally be acquired and enhanced with YouTube videos as an instruction or a supporting tool. Making Power Point presentations and giving presentations have become ubiquitous at all education levels, from elementary to academia. YouTube's TED talks mentioned earlier in the paper have proven to be very useful to that end. By following the talks of prominent members of scientific and academic community, students can learn how to organize a presentation, get to know tips to apply when creating a Power Point presentation and analyze the entire process to find the way to giving a successful presentation. The teacher's relevance as a guide that highlights particular aspects of a presentation and makes students aware of the importance of presentation segments is unquestionable. Additionally, TED talks are an exceptional material for distinguishing between the oral language used in presentations and the one specific to academic writing. Developing this skill also needs to be teacher guided.

Differentiating between oral and written language, as well as learning to identify the different language registers, is the part of extending vocabulary technique which requires theoretical and practical framework provided in advance.

The list of favorable aspects of YouTube use in a foreign language classroom is by no means exhaustive. Although primarily teacher-centered, the development of the skills above can be effectively promoted by using social media, YouTube in particular, as valuable tools for maximizing foreign language learning gains.

Apart from the positive aspects of YouTube application in the classroom, possible disadvantages may include content inaccuracy, poor video and audio quality, intellectual property rights, bad pronunciation, unavailability of YouTube clips, as a great number of videos are deleted on a daily basis, etc., however, positive aspects of YouTube application by far outweigh constraints and challenges which can be easily managed bearing in mind the enormous corpus of the YouTube material. Having YouTube as the incentive tool for creative work, 'millennials' are inspired to create videos of their own, be it entertainment or education thus motivating them to expand their productive capacities.

5.   CONCLUSION

Social media have become ubiquitous in the 21st century society to the extent to "entail new conditions and opportunities for teaching and learning" [2].As the Net Generation has a strong command of competencies to communicate via ICT, the introduction of online resources as learning supports in an academic context is a viable alternative to the traditional course management system [2].

Informal learning of social networks has great potential to bridge the communication gap between digital natives and their digital counterparts. Application of social networking software, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have proven to be highly effective in augmenting FLL competences, both receptive and productive ones. Three important affordances of social media for students' learning, i.e. fostering active learning, enhancing students' collaboration, and increasing their community connections are the desirable outcomes of the teaching process [31]. Studies have shown that social media-based learning encourages students to extend their engagement beyond the classroom assignments and prompt them to enhance their knowledge in the realm of their learning interests. Transforming current academic learning environment greatly depends on the openness of faculty to accept and incorporate pedagogies which facilitate and maximize learning gains in the social media environment.

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