A Learning Success Story Using Facebook

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Abstract

The use of Web 2.0 tools such as wikis and blogs is becoming more widespread in the language learning classroom, however social networking can also be an effective tool. Social networking is not only easy to use; it also helps encourage an autonomous learning within a social environment for students. Activities using a social networking site, such as Facebook, can put control for studying into the students' hands. It can create not only motivation but also increase students' social relationships outside of the classroom. This article discusses how simple activities in Facebook helped a lower language proficient class to become more comfortable participating in online discussions, giving their opinions and forging closer relationships with their fellow classmates.

Keywords: Web 2.0, motivation, participation, social networking

Technology has become a natural part of everyday life and is now infiltrating the language education sector. There are numerous technology tools which can be integrated into the classroom and used outside class, such as chat, email, blogging, microblogging and social networking, to name a few. Social networking has increased in popularity in recent years and sites such as MySpace and Facebook can be a very useful tool in the classroom as they promote both target language use while also promoting learner autonomy among language students. Holec (1981) defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Dickinson defined it as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions " (p. 22). These definitions focus on the idea that autonomy is capacity within learners rather than their learning situations, which can result in a more positive and motivating learning experience for students as students themselves decide what they would like to do and how. Sanpraset (2010) argues that autonomous learning is a relatively new concept in many countries such as Japan, Thailand and France. In these countries' education systems are based more on “rote memorization, attention to detail, and precise, linear and logical analysis without critical thought” (p. 110). It can be difficult for students in Japan to become accustomed to taking control of their own learning.

Introducing social networking sites such as Twitter or Facebook can help students increase their own language learning in a fun and motivating way. A number of studies (see Mork, 2009) discuss using Twitter in the classroom. While microblogging can be useful and encourage students to use more concise language as they must write posts no longer than 160 characters, it can be difficult to keep up-to-date with messages. Twitter can group topics using hashtags but this can be confusing for students, especially if they have little background in technology. Twitter can also link video, television or polls; however these require separate applications. Facebook on the other hand can help keep topics grouped together in one place, which is easier for students to read and they have more control over the length of their posts. They can attach links, share photos and videos, send private messages, add notes or easily chat online synchronously. According to facebook.com there are currently approximately 800 million active users worldwide in over 70 languages and with more than 350 million users accessing Facebook on their mobile devices. In other words, Facebook is an extremely convenient application that students and educators can access anywhere. Not all students have access to a computer or internet at home and by having mobile access to Facebook; students are able to access their accounts anywhere.

Saving Face in the Classroom

Participants
This activity involved twenty-seven lower language proficient students in their first year at a private university in Chiba, Japan. The students had TOEIC scores of 300-500 (equivalent to levels A2-B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and were 18-19 years of age. Although involvement was voluntary, all members of the class chose to participate both inside and outside the classroom.

The activities

With the spread of Web 2.0 tools, many educational technology experts feel that multimedia technologies can “motivate students to learn languages better than without it” (Kim, 2009). Multimedia technologies can be more interesting and refreshing to students and whether teachers introduce new technologies or incorporate multimedia tools that students are already familiar with, they can increase students' motivation and language output. Langer de Ramirez (2010, p. 3) also states that “Web 2.0 tools are forgiving of errors and provide students with ways to save face as they practice their new language in cyberspace”. As Web 2.0 encourages more interactivity and in a bid to increase student motivation using computers at the end of first semester, it was decided that social networking would be incorporated into a lower language proficient class.

The aim of this paper is to offer some initial observations on how the use of a social network site appeared to motivate learners to participate and take charge of online discussions. Clearly further research is needed involving a more systematic analysis of the data, however, initial observations indicate that the use of Facebook contributed to increased student motivation and language output. Facebook was chosen for this activity as students were able to control what information they shared, is relatively easy to use and students could make the activities as easy or challenging as they wished as students were able to decide the level of difficulty and content of their questions, posts and the videos they uploaded. Only three of the twenty-seven students were already using Facebook, however they were not accessing it regularly. This is representative of Facebook users in Japan as according to Tabuchi (2011) less than two percent of Japan's population is using Facebook. The class spent one entire lesson making accounts on Facebook and learning about privacy matters and online safety. Students were given the choice of viewing Facebook either in English or in Japanese during the sign up process as it was important that they understood the settings for their own privacy and online safety. Once all members of the class had successfully created Facebook accounts, it was decided that students would use it to discuss a weekly topic in a secret group set up by the teacher. By using a secret group and selecting the highest level of privacy, students were able to post to the group without worrying about who was viewing their posts and activities.

The activity began with the teacher starting the first discussion. Students were given one week outside of class to answer the question and although the activity was not a compulsory component of the course syllabus, students who did contribute were allocated bonus marks towards their final participation grade. This continued for three weeks and during this time students were encouraged to navigate through their own Facebook page and update their profiles, add pictures and find friends. While students were not required to be friends in order to post in the secret group, all participating members were required to become friends with each other in order to be able to post responses on each other’s walls and to enable chat. The second month into the exercise the class was divided into groups of three and each week one group was asked to collaborate, decide on a question and post it as a new discussion topic where their classmates could enter into a discussion. It was interesting to observe the range of questions the students devised and how the length of replies and the content developed over time. The student generated questions ranged from simple, less detailed topics such as vacations, Christmas, and favourite animated characters to more adventurous ones which required more detailed replies such as, New year aspirations, music and questions/feedback related to the students’ own in-class presentations, videos of which had been uploaded by the teacher.

When the teacher was posting questions students’ answers were brief and cautious and students wrote many short sentences (see table 1). The average post was approximately 3 sentences consisting of an average of 5 words per sentence. Students later began using longer sentences with conjunctions. However, once the students themselves began to form their own discussion questions the replies increased in length and the content became more detailed (see table 2). Studies on the effects of Computer Assisted Classroom Discussion (CACD) (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996) found that CACD motivated students more when it was initiated by the students themselves more than when it was initiated by the teacher, and this was observed to be occurring in the Facebook activity.

Table 1. Initial responses to teacher generated question regarding the class orientation trip

| Please write about our class trip. What did you like? / What didn't you like? Would you like to go back? |  |
|---|---|---|
| Please write about our class trip. What did you like? / What didn't you like? Would you like to go back? |  |

Table 1. Initial responses to teacher generated question regarding the class orientation trip
I liked the stars at night. It was so beautiful! I didn't like the baths.

I expected a big bathtub… I would like to go back with everyone again?

I liked delicious foods. I did not like the baths.

I want to go to there again.

Table 2. Student-generated topic on a famous person they would like to meet and why

If you could meet any famous person in the world who would you meet? What would you ask them? Why?

Student 1

I would like to meet BoA! I would like to talk to her about dancing and ask her how can I be good at dancing like her because her dance is very very cool!

Student 2

I'd like to meet Hikaru Utada. I love listening and singing her songs. One of my favorite her songs is "Hikari", so I'd like to go karaoke with her and sing it together.

As a result of students forming their own discussions on Facebook this enabled the learning to become student-centered rather than teacher-centered and students were able to develop not only their computer literacy but also their social competencies. Students were also given opportunities to use Facebook synchronously using the chat tool in class to discuss topics and post links to each other for discussion. In an interview of 10 students, 7 students stated that they enjoyed doing this as they could think about what they wanted to say and check it before sending it to their partners and it was "exciting" because they had to respond faster as their partner was waiting for replies in real time whereas in the weekly discussion activity the students had longer to think and respond. Students were able to work at their own pace and they would often ask a student sitting near them for help if they were unsure about vocabulary or expressions. They also liked the fact that they were able to choose what they wanted to talk about making the activity more autonomous and therefore learner centred. Sutherland-Smith (2002) completed a study on online discussions in an ESL class in Australia and she found that students only asked for help when they had technical difficulties and this was seen to be occurring in this class. Similarly, the 7 students also said that they felt more confident and were able to say more compared to when they were participating in oral face-to-face discussions. Kern (1995) states that some CMC environments can lead to “greater language production in terms of messages and turns than in face-to-face” which can be seen in the comments made by students and what was actually observed in the chat transcripts. Students were able to discuss numerous topics and express their opinions which all students in the interview admitted was more comfortable to do in an online environment compared to face-to-face, especially in a culture where people do not often openly state their opinions (see table 3). Baron (2010, p. 84) suggests that “communication technologies are increasingly offering people the opportunity to manage their terms of interpersonal linguistic engagement”.

Table 3. Students' opinions about movies

What kind of movies do you like and why?

Student 1

Student 2
As Lacina (2004) states, discussion boards can encourage collaboration among students and enable them to partake in experiential learning experiences. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002, p. 319) stated that “teachers can enhance situational intrinsic motivation and thus increase academic achievement by finding tasks and activities that are highly engaging for students”. What had initially begun as an extrinsically motivated activity, where students were able to receive bonus marks for participating, soon transformed into an intrinsically motivated as all 27 students in the class chose to participate in the activity. By transferring the discussion topics to the students an increase in participation resulted with students writing not only longer posts but multiple replies to questions. In the initial three weeks of the activity all students replied only once to the teacher generated questions. The first two student generated questions also had one reply by each student. After scaffolding from the teacher and assistance in how to continue an online discussion, students began with an initial reply to the question and then a further reply to a classmate’s response. By the end of the activity 14 of the 27 students were making 3 or 4 posts in response to classmates’ posts. They gained more confidence and gave their opinions more online and by the end of the second semester, students were noticeably more interactive not only online but also in face-to-face activities in the classroom. Students went from merely answering questions on the Discussion page to actually interacting on each other’s Walls, uploading pictures along with video, joining fan pages and also using the chat function independently, not only with their classmates and teacher, but also with other friends they had found on Facebook. It was also noticed that their interactions on Facebook outside the discussion activity were increasingly appearing in English. Some students even posted questions about grammar points if they did not know the correct word or usage.

Conclusions

As can be seen above, incorporating Facebook into the classroom was a new experience for students, not only technology-wise but also using the English language. It was observed that following the incorporation of the Facebook activity many of the more introverted students became more motivated in class and were actually talking more with their classmates. It was also noticed that students began to express more opinions and give extended reasoning in not only their face-to-face interactions but also in their written classwork. While it is impossible to say that social networking was the reason for these differences, it can be said that it possibly played a role and these types of activities do show promise as they appear to give students choices and opportunities to have control over their own learning. These kinds of opportunities and environments may create conditions for facilitating the development of learner autonomy.

Notes on the contributor

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References


When it comes to 21st century online success stories, few compare to the incredible growth and worldwide change that Facebook has achieved.