

Using Social Networks for Language Practice

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Abstract: The Internet has the potential to provide language learners with vast resources of authentic written, audio, and video materials to supplement lessons. Educators can find a vast amount of materials for learners to study during class or for independent learning outside of class to encourage learner autonomy. More recently, however, the immense popularity of social networking websites has created new opportunities for language learners to interact in authentic ways that were previously difficult to achieve. Advances in technology mean that today, learners of a language can easily interact with their peers in meaningful practice that helps foster language acquisition and motivation. That is, tasks that make use of Web 2.0 interactivity can significantly raise students' potential to generate meaningful output and stimulate their interest in language learning.

Keywords: Language learning, social networks, independent learning, meaningful output

Introduction

One of the main reasons for the immense popularity of social networking is the process of potentially maintaining and developing online relationships (Thorne, 2010). It is not only a way to view pictures of friends such as on Facebook, view short messages on Twitter, or post videos on YouTube, it is also of as a form of expression, interaction, and community building. An increasing number of educators and learners are making use of these tools to communicate outside of the classroom. Perhaps it is the emphasis on using the target language as a resource for building interpersonal relationships that differentiates it from traditional approaches to language learning pedagogy and provides an opportunity for success. Innovative and pedagogically effective ways to improve language learning include instructional uses, students' perceived learning gains, instructors' use of the technology, social impact and economic viability for use by the students (Facer and Abdous, 2011). In this workshop, I will introduce some of the pedagogical concepts outlined in this paper and discuss how they can be introduced in a language learning classroom.

1. Language Acquisition

1.1 Language Production

Generating language is an important part of the language acquisition process. Creating student-generated materials such as podcasts or videos is interesting to students and helps them to learn and acquire the language. According to Swain (2007), "The output hypothesis claims that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning." Thus,

encouraging students to speak and experiment with the language is an integral part of learning.

A Web-based learning environment can promote constructivist learning through authentic activities related to the vast amount of information available on the Internet. Instructors can provide students with access to a substantial variety of tasks available in a combination of formats, such as text, graphics, audio, and video. Moreover, these multimedia resources can contribute to an increase in students' motivation (Woo, Herrington, Agostinho, and Reeves, 2007).

1.2 Learning Constraints

Teachers often feel constrained by the lack of reading and listening materials that students have access to and the acute lack of opportunities in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings for students to practice their English speaking skills in a meaningful way. In Japanese universities, for example, students can commonly take one class (90 minutes) of English conversation per week over a 15-week term. Normally, there are two terms per academic year. Typically, most of the undergraduate students are busy with other classes, part-time jobs, and socializing with their friends. This is scarcely enough time for students to significantly improve their speaking skills. Therefore, it can be challenging to encourage students to practice their English language skills outside of class. To motivate students, it is indispensable to use materials that are relevant to the students' levels and needs. The Internet has helped to alleviate this restriction. More recently, due to the incredible processing power of modern computers and the fast transfer speeds provided through broadband Internet connections, sharing sound and video files has become a reality. Whereas just a few years ago Internet users were limited to reading and writing messages in text, the World Wide Web has come of age, and it is now routinely possible to send and receive the huge amounts of data required for audio and video files. This fact, as well as vast improvement in software development, has made it possible for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) educators and language learners to make full use of the Internet to assist students with improving language skills.

2. Discussion

2.1 Social Networking Web sites

Social networking Web sites, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, have become extremely popular among Internet users who wish to share their ideas, videos, and other activities online (Dieu and Stevens, 2007). This contemporary phenomenon has led the World Wide Web in innovation, and the term Web 2.0 specifically applies to these types of services. These Web sites can be accessed easily; they are free and interesting to users. They are new tools for learners of English to express themselves in authentic ways. Teachers can support students with this type of social networking activity by having them practice a speech that they want to record before sharing it with the rest of the online community.

2.1.1 YouTube

A search on YouTube will reveal a number of ESL-related videos posted by teachers and students. These can be shown to students who are not confident about posting their videos on the Internet. The videos can also be used to promote discussions in class. Posting a video is not as difficult as it sounds, especially if computer resources are available to the teacher and students. Before recording the video, learners usually like to practice what they are going to say, thus encouraging language training without forcing the student to conduct repetitive drills. A wide variety of topics can be covered depending on the needs of the learner.

2.1.2 Twitter

Twitter is described as a social networking and microblogging service that users like to use for short messages of 140 characters in length (Tweeter.net, 2011). The short format is a unique way of communicating that has captivated the creative minds of millions of users and it is an interesting method for students to keep in touch with each other as well as with the teacher. One possible lesson may start with a teacher telling a story to the learners. Then, the teacher instructs the students to continue the story. Another idea may be for the teacher to ask trivia questions, and the students attempt to answer them in class (ESL Daily, 2011).

2.1.3 Facebook

The most successful social networking site is Facebook. This Web site has hundreds of millions of users and it is an enticing way for students to form an online community. One of the problems, however, is the possibility of privacy infringement as students get more confident in their English writing skills and become more open to talk about their private lives online. It may be necessary for teachers and students to discuss some ground rules for using Facebook before starting to use it. This may save some embarrassment later when photographs are posted online. It is, however, an excellent way to communicate as the content that is posted to the site may motivate learners to share ideas and thoughts that would be very difficult to duplicate in a classroom setting. One way to get around the problem of sharing private information is to create an account with a fictitious name, a drawing of a face instead of a real picture and to develop a pseudonym personality. Using a temporary email account would also alleviate some of the issues of using a current email account that could attract unwanted requests. The character that is presented in the Facebook account could be very realistic and join groups as a real person, thus avoiding some of the privacy issues.

2.2 Podcasting

Developing a podcast is like planning a syllabus (Chartrand, 2009). There are quantitative elements to consider, such as how many lessons, how much time per lesson, and how much material to cover. There are qualitative elements as well: What level of language is appropriate for the learner? What are the goals, objectives, and needs of the learner? Therefore, questions that might be asked when producing a podcast may include: How many podcast episodes will be produced? How long will each episode last? Who will do the recording? These are some of the questions to ask when developing an original podcast for language learning. For example, one can anticipate producing English conversations for beginner, intermediate, and advanced level learners, respectively.

At the beginning level, one can anticipate that the English learner will not have good listening skills, therefore it may be useful to play each conversation three times: the first

time at normal speed, the second time at a slow speed so that the learners can hear each word pronounced clearly, and the third time at normal speed. This may facilitate the learner's understanding before going to the next step. Other levels of learning may need less intervention from natural speech.

Not everyone has the time or technical inclination to embark on the task of creating podcasts. There are, however, a large number of podcasts that could be used in ESOL classes for language input and speaking practice. Here are a few examples that are useful for learning English.

- <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com>
This podcast specializes in current events. It contains excellent materials for use in the classroom, such as warm-up activities, before and after reading-listening activities, a survey, discussion questions, and a writing task. It is read in British English.
- <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish>
This Web site from Voice of America contains many news items that are read by a VOA announcer in slow American English, so it is easy to understand for non-English speakers.
- <http://a4esl.org/podcasts/>
This is a collection of links to the 30 newest podcasts for ESL learners. It contains a good source of information to see what's new.

3. Conclusion

There are a number of ways to use social networking Web sites to encourage ESOL students to listen and to produce their own materials to share on the Internet. This type of activity used to be very difficult to integrate into ESOL lessons due to costs and technical limitations; however, these barriers have slowly been fading, and it is now possible to use these online tools to improve students' English ability. This is useful, but challenges remain. There is a certain amount of time needed for teachers and students to learn how to use Web 2.0 technology. Even if one is familiar with computers, there is still a need to learn how to use software, to search for podcasts, and set-up accounts with social networking Web sites. Additionally, the privacy issues of using social networking are a cause for concern. The security and privacy requirements of these sites are complicated and not well understood or defined (Ahn, Shehab and Squicciarini, 2011). Thus it may become necessary for teachers to become knowledgeable in security policies on the shared data of students.

A number of students do not enjoy learning with computers and do not attempt to study outside the classroom. But this is likely true no matter what medium is used for instructional delivery. It is sometimes difficult to keep up with all the latest trends and techniques, however, this is a very positive trend for both teachers and students of languages, and learning how to use this technology will allow learners to develop communicative language skills more effectively.

Language learners through new technologies can produce meaningful output. They are easy to use, inexpensive, and readily available through the Internet. Motivational, pedagogical, and affective factors are persuasive arguments for making an effort to

experiment with this technology, and ESOL teachers can contribute significantly to their learners' progress in learning English.

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