Social Media in Education: Some Lessons from TEFL Classroom

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Abstract

With the proliferation of "social media," or digital media employed for content production and connection among individuals, education and professional training have acquired various powerful tools for dissemination and exchange of information, "real-life" simulations, integration of learning and practice, and so on. Learning with the help of technology, or blended learning, has become mandatory in many countries as it develops the digital literacy indispensable for workers of the new millennium. The field of foreign language teaching, which embraced computer-assisted learning long ago, provides sufficient evidence of the numerous benefits of teaching with social media, such as its potential for creating an authentic, interactive and highly-motivating learning environment. At the same time, the experience of teaching foreign languages with social media also identifies certain problems and issues needing to be addressed for the learning process to be more effective. Specifically, both students and teachers need to possess a conglomeration of digital literacies, which include computer and informational literacy, knowledge of netiquette and electronic discourse, and so on. This article will look at various issues connected with using social media in foreign language teaching and their implications for teaching and learning with digital communication media in general.

Blended Learning in Foreign Language Teaching

Blended learning is an educational course, which combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards. "It also includes the use of computers as a means of communication, such as chat and email, and a number of environments which enable teachers to enrich their courses, such as VLEs (virtual learning environments), blogs and wikis" (Sharma & Barrett, 2007, p. 7). Besides adding value to an educational course, incorporation of technology in teaching serves another important purpose, the development of a new type of literacy, digital literacy. As was recently proclaimed by the International Society for Technology in Education, all educational institutions are charged in the 21st century with the mission to prepare their students to become digital citizens in their future workplace:

> As technology dramatically changes our society, educators need to demonstrate the skills and behaviors of digital-age professionals. Competence with technology is the foundation. … Today's educators must provide a learning environment that takes students beyond the walls of their classrooms and into a world of endless opportunities. Technology standards promote this classroom transformation by ensuring that digital-age students are empowered to learn, live, and work successfully today and tomorrow. (*ISTE*, 2008)

In teaching foreign languages, blended learning was introduced significantly earlier. The first international CALL (computer-assisted language learning) conference took place as early as in 1980, and the next two decades saw the outburst of research into various aspects of foreign language teaching with technology. In many countries, teaching with technology has become almost mandatory. Thus, in 1999, the [U.S.] *National Standards in Foreign Language Learning in the 21ˢᵗ Century* required the incorporation of new technologies into the foreign language learning experience side by side with "old" devices and textual formats:

> Access to a variety of technologies ranging from computer-assisted instruction to interactive video, CD-ROM, the Internet, electronic mail, and the World Wide Web, will help students strengthen linguistic skills, establish interactions with peers, and learn about contemporary culture and everyday life in the target country. In addition, students can expand their knowledge of the target culture via edited and unedited programs available on short-wave radio, satellite broadcasts, and cassette or video recordings.　　(*National Standards*, p. 35)

Technology, according to *Standards*, provides access to authentic sources of language and such access "helps establish the necessary knowledge base for language learners" (p. 36).

The ability of learners to use new technologies is also recognized as one of the important heuristic skills by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001), the major international guidelines for foreign language learning in European countries. The other valuable heuristic skills include:

> - the ability of the learner to come in terms with new experience (new language, new people, new ways of behaving, etc.) and to bring other competences to bear (e.g., by observing, grasping the significance of what is observed, analyzing, inferencing, memorizing, etc.) in the specific learning situation; and
> - the ability of the learner (particularly in using target language reference sources) to find, understand and if necessary convey new information.　　(*COE Framework*, p.108)

Although the emphasis in the use of new technologies is placed in the Framework on the ability to navigate hypertexts, search and retrieve information, "it should be obvious for teachers and students that networked computers and other types of networked devices now also play a central [role] in the act of communication itself. Computers and computer networks are no longer limited to providing quick access to data" (Williams, 2009, p. 45).

A shift from grammar-translation methods towards communicative ones placed the primary emphasis on the development of communicative competence, and this is where social media gains paramount importance. The ability to communicate in the target language is currently recognized by all national and international curricula as the main objective of language learning. Thus, *Communication* makes one of the five big *C*'s in the *Standards*, together with *Culture*, *Connections*, *Comparisons*, and *Communities* that should form the basis for foreign language teaching and learning in the United States:

"Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. ··· Communication is at the heart of second language study, whether the communication takes place face-to-face, in writing, or across centuries through the reading of literature" (*National Standards*, 2001 pp. 1-2). Obviously, such modes of communication as reading, writing and face-to-face interaction are indisputably essential for learning communicative skills and will probably remain dominant in language teaching in the foreseen future. However, the growing presence of social media in education radically changes the ways these skills are taught and practiced now by significantly enriching both reading and writing or substituting face-to-face interaction with virtual communication, where the former one is not available.

The Role of Social Media in Teaching Foreign Languages

The major advantage of the social media for teaching languages is that it is capable of turning communication into interactive dialogs with the help of web-based technologies. Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (2010, p. 59). By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) researchers identify six different types of social media: collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual communities (ibid.).

While each of these types of media has its own peculiarities and offers a different context for language learning, all of them share certain features, which make social media indispensable for developing communicative skills. The most important of these characteristics is the authentic nature of communication via social media. Classroom tasks are essentially pedagogic in nature and, at best, can only simulate real life experiences. The partners in interaction are either peers or teachers, and learners' behavior in such communication is primarily oriented towards teachers and their assessment of students' production. In communication with the help of social media, learners engage in interaction with real people and complete real meaningful tasks, thus the dominant presence of the teacher in such interactions is diminished, if not removed altogether. Communicative act via social media is now the learner's responsibility, and this generates the next positive outcome of using Web 2.0 technologies – the significantly improved student motivation. One of the earlier studies into student motivation for learning languages through communication on the Internet showed that students do not perceive the Internet only as a venue for expressing their creativity and interests, but also as a place for finding new friends. As their desire to communicate with the newly-found peers grows it stimulates the process of positive personal and linguistic development (Lam, 2000).

Besides authenticity of communication another important contributor to motivation is the scaffolding that native-speaking peers can provide in various formats of communication on the Net. Chapelle (2003) indicates that motivation is essential for "making the cognitive effort to engage the process of comprehension, which sometimes requires asking for help, and sometimes results in noticing a gap in knowledge" (p. 39). With the help of social media learners can get such help directly from their interlocutors (email, wikis) or indirectly, by observing the linguistic behavior of native speakers (chats,

blogs, forums).

Numerous studies carried out in classrooms and laboratories using online technologies also indicate that social media provide a secure and uninhibited learning environment (Belisle, 1996; Warschauer, 1995; etc.). Lack of face-to-face contact allows the communicants to conceal their real identity and interact as equals irrespective of age, nationality, gender or social status. Also, in communication with social media learners have more freedom in constructing the role they are currently comfortable with. They may choose to be "a participant with the right to speak, or a marginal person feeling the need to remain silent" (Chapelle, 2003, p. 39). Thus, even in such highly-interactive and communicatively-demanding environments as chat rooms and forums, learners can control the amount of input they make, reflect on and correct their language, or even lurk in a discussion without being pressed to produce any language (ibid., p. 15).

One of the major, if not the most important, fortes of social media is that they facilitate the development of overall intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997). The latter, going beyond linguistic fluency and intercultural sensitivity, encompasses pragmatic competence, or the ability of learners to appropriately use the target language in various social contexts. Since most of the EFL learners acquire largely formal speech habits in the classroom, their exposure to other authentic registers and modes of the language is very limited. Social media, with their potential to offer different formats of synchronous and asynchronous interaction, remain for many foreign language students the best, if not the only opportunity to learn other varieties of language. Conversations taking place in social media are variants of English, which unlike abstract textbook dialogues, will probably "be common for English language learners' future use of English, indicates Chapelle (2003, p. 16). *National Standards* for learning target languages in the U.S. also strongly emphasizes the importance of intercultural communicative competence:

> "*Knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom*." All the linguistic and social knowledge required for effective human-to-human interaction is encompassed in those ten words. Formerly, most teaching in foreign language classrooms concentrated on the ***how***[1] (grammar) to say ***what*** (vocabulary). While these components of language are indeed crucial, the current organizing principle for foreign language study is ***communication***, which also highlights the ***why***, the ***whom***, and the ***when***. So, while grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, it is the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom.   (*National Standards*, p. 24)

Thus, social media provide numerous advantages for blended learning. Besides those mentioned above, some other studies of networked language learning indicate more active and equitable learner participation (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1995), a more student-centered and dynamic environment (Darhower, 2002), and maximum interactivity, as learners are constantly involved in processing

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1   Emphasis original.

communicational input and producing responsive output (Abrams, 2003). These and other advantages of using social media in teaching foreign languages can be of equal benefit to other subjects and knowledge areas, where communication can foster cognition. The experience of language teachers also shows that in order to reap the benefits of technology to the fullest, educators need to be aware of the possible problems that typically occur in interaction over the Net. Preventing and trouble-shooting these problems is highly desirable for communication with social media to become a valuable and enjoyable learning experience.

What Teachers Need to Know about Social Media

Computer-assisted language learning has accumulated numerous publications giving various recommendations on the best way of using different formats of social media in teaching. Some of these recommendations are language-specific and concern different activities directed towards developing certain linguistic skills. Others address communicative practices in a particular technology-mediated environment. But there are some concerns, which pertain to all social media in general and apply to any learning or teaching context.

First, education with social media requires a new type of literacy, or rather a pluralistic notion of "digital literacies," as was suggested by Lankshear and Knobel (2008). The multiple dimensions of digital literacies encompass what is traditionally understood as literacy, or the ability to read and write, as well as computer literacy and information literacy and refer to the "key learning principles that can be adapted and leveraged for equitable educational learning" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p.14).

Within the complex conglomeration of digital literacies, there is one issue which is often overlooked in blended teaching: the significant alteration of linguistic literacy per se due to the new demands of digital network interaction. Educational practice "has been slow to recognize that [traditional] textual norms provide inadequate preparation for contemporary communication" (Lotherington et al., 2009, p.11), which utilizes a new form of language, i.e., electronic discourse. This specific way of writing has developed to meet the needs of text-based, but speech-like interaction via computers and cell-phones, which encourages economical, compressed and fast-paced message production.

The unique linguistic and iconographic features of electronic writing comprise, but are not limited to, innovative abbreviation (acronyms, clippings, logograms, or letter-numeral hybrids and letter-morpheme substitutes, vowel deletion, etc.), emoticons, truncated simplified syntax, non-normative capitalization and other characteristics. Reoccurring in most of the informal and spontaneous message exchanges, such as chat, texting, and informal email, these features currently comprise a norm of their own. This norm significantly deviates from the standard languages that most students have been previously exposed to in the traditional classroom setting and requires the learner's "ability to communicate in ways that are fundamentally different from those found in other semiotic situations" (Crystal, 2001, p. 5). Until recently, even in language teaching, many instructors intentionally ignored the need to teach electronic discourse and considered the linguistic relaxation it offers as a requisite of uninhibited environment of online communication (Al-Jarf, 2006). Currently, however, more and more researchers emphasize that electronic discourse as a part of digital literacies needs to be taught. Sefton-

Green, for instance, observes that though educational institutions are faced with significant challenges about how they bring together education and digital culture, it is shortsighted to ignore the needs for schools to engage digital literacies or to expect such knowledge to "spontaneously erupt from young people" (2001, p. 728).

Another important component of digital literacies is the knowledge of rules of behavior on the Internet, or netiquette. The concept of netiquette evolved over the final decade of the last century with realization of the various consequences of the seemingly unlimited freedom of expression online. Currently, netiquette comprises an immense set of different recommendations, from ideological and social norms of a "politically correct" message to linguistic rules, regulating electronic discourse. As there is no single authority that "polices" communication in the Internet, at present the corpus of netiquette rules is quite nebulous and controversial (Averianova, 2007). However, in order to avoid the negative outcomes of online interaction such as flaming, exclusion, lack of understanding or complete disruption of communication, social media require certain understanding of communicative contexts and knowledge of the discursive and international features of communication in technology-mediated environment (Chapelle, 2003, p. 18). Involvement in "Netspeak", as Crystal calls electronic discourse, obliges social media users to acquire the rules of "how to communicate via e-mail, of how to talk in chatgroups, of how to construct an effective Web page, of how to socialize in fantasy roles" (Crystal, 2001, pp. 14-15). Thus, besides the general guidelines of the appropriate use of the medium and introduction to ethical norms of electronic communication, which are included in most netiquette compilations, teachers who use social media need to develop their students' digital communicative competence, or ability to deploy the appropriate language knowledge and strategic competence for a particular context (Bachman, 1990).

Such communicative competence prevents, as well, another problem that social media can impose on education: the spillover of texting into academic writing of students. It has been noticed, that under the influence of daily exposure to the language of compressed message exchange on mobile phones, or texting, some students demonstrate certain problems with code-switching skills and tend to use texting in situations requiring normative language usage. Manifestations of this include use of casual grammar and spelling, lack of appropriate format, use of emoticons and homophonic coinages in students' e-mail correspondence with teachers (Abdullah, 1998; Averianova, 2009) and penetration of texting shorthand into students' academic writing (Berman, 2006). Currently, texting is considered inappropriate in an academic context and many educational authorities forbid the presence of any elements of shorthand writing in examination papers (Averianova, 2009). This attitude may, however, change as more educators now accept mobile phones as an indispensable part of the youth culture and utilize this technology as a learning tool (McCarty, 2009). While language educators are still considering how to respond to such unconventional language as texting in their classroom, Chapelle suggests that, for the time being, "teachers' best option might be to show examples and help students to become more aware of the effects of the linguistic choices they might make" (Chapelle, 2003, p. 17) in different registers and styles of electronic communication using social media.

Finally, there is one more remark about social media from the field of teaching foreign languages that can apply across other disciplines. It is the issue of appropriateness of the medium for

various age groups of learners. This concerns, first of all, different networking and gaming platforms that provide Virtual World educational and training experiences. As games are gaining wider recognition in education, they are no longer populated by demographically narrow audiences. Therefore, learning activities in virtual worlds should be suitable for the needs of a more general learner, on the one hand, or adjusted to the characteristics of specific age groups, on the other. Thus, a very popular virtual communication platform Second Life is clearly designed for an "adult" (18 years old or older) learner. For virtual life projects intended for younger users, teachers may consider the use of more appropriate for teenagers programs, such as Teen Second Life, There, and others.

Understanding of these and other issues connected with the use of social media in education should be included in the arsenal of any modern teacher, while computer-assisted teaching at large should become a part of the teacher-training curriculum. Like second-language teachers, all educators "today need to be able to choose, use, and in some cases, refuse technology for their students. Success in all three requires professional expertise beyond what they should have to pick up in self study" (Chapelle, 2006, p. vii).

Conclusion

Social media, with multiple opportunities they provide for communication, information exchange and collaboration, have become invaluable partners for education and professional training. The authentic, interactive environments of social media are especially relevant for, but not limited to, teaching foreign languages, where they can lead to highly motivated and autonomous learning and authentic language practice.

As social media become a normal and expected way of communication and education, important changes occur in expectations regarding the abilities students have to acquire to be successful language users (Bruce & Hogan, 1998). These skills comprise the conglomeration of digital literacies, which include knowledge of computers, the ability to effectively locate, retrieve and critically evaluate information available on the Internet, and developed communicative competence, or knowledge of the discursive, pragmatic and interactional features of communication on line.

Moreover, the bond between technology and education requires that skills and literacies similar to those expected in learners should be directly relevant to teachers. Beside enhancing digital literacies of a user, social media oblige teachers to have the knowledge and skills of a provider, capable of professional assessment of learning outcomes of any electronically-mediated teaching environment. The breathtaking speed of technology development quickly renders obsolete recent solutions and pushes educators forward in search of new ones. In this never-ending pursuit, only the collective effort of all educators from different knowledge fields and subject areas can be effective in harnessing the ever-changing world of modern technology for the service of education.

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