Social networking: Developing intercultural competence and fostering autonomous learning

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Abstract. With the emergence of Web 2.0, the incorporation of internet-based social networking tools is becoming increasingly popular in the foreign language classes of today. This form of social interaction provides students with the opportunity to express and share their views with their peers, and to create profiles as well as online communities of common interests. Furthermore, through their engagement in online social networking, students develop relationships, build friendships and collaborate with others (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). Online social networking sites have enhanced the environment for language learning and have become a potential platform for internet-based cultural tasks in L2 classes. As a form of telecollaboration, social networking fosters online intercultural interaction between students of different countries with a view to developing intercultural competence. With this in mind, the present study aims to explore how students from two countries, namely, Spain and Mauritius, can develop intercultural competence through the use of the social networking platform Elgg as a telecollaborative learning context. It also discusses whether online social interaction can foster student learning autonomy.

Keywords: social networking, autonomous learning, telecollaboration, online interaction, critical thinking.

1. Introduction

The incorporation of internet-based social networking tools has been gaining popularity nowadays among foreign language learners since they are provided with the opportunity to interact in authentic ways so as to share their views with their peers, create profiles and develop relationships online (Thorne,

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2010). Furthermore, through their engagement online, they build friendships and collaborate with others (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). The use of Web 2.0 tasks that encourage interactivity can stimulate students' interest and increase their motivation in language learning.

The primary objective of L2 culture learning is that students should gain an in-depth understanding of cultural traits, and not simply learn about culture at a surface level. As Bennett (1993) posits, for learners to become interculturally competent, they need to be unbiased towards other people's cultures so that they can appreciate cross-cultural perspectives with this open-minded attitude. As a result, learners are encouraged to reflect on their own similarities and differences as well as on those of their counterparts to better their understanding of each other's culture. Since the classroom situation has been deemed insufficient for the learning of culture, social networking sites are bridging the gap by affording learners the opportunity to interact with their counterparts in distant locations.

Nevertheless, there is currently a lack of research into the application of Web 2.0 for intercultural exchange (Lomicka & Lord, 2009), and the target of the present study is to make a contribution in this area. Consequently, the study aims, firstly, to explore how students of two countries, Spain and Mauritius, can develop intercultural competence through their interaction on the social network platform Elgg, and, secondly, to discuss whether social online interaction can foster autonomous learning. The following questions guided the study:

- What can students learn about each other's culture online?
- Can social interaction foster learning autonomy?

2. Method

2.1. The project

The project, which was designed for the present study, was task-based and lasted for four months, from March to June 2013. Twenty-four students, of whom fourteen were Spanish and ten were Mauritian, were involved in the study. The Spanish participants were preparing for Cambridge ESOL examinations at levels C1 and C2 (on the Common European Framework of Reference), whereas the Mauritian participants were studying a degree in Computer Science. All the participants were non-native speakers of English, although English was the Mauritian students' medium of instruction. The participants were expected to interact asynchronously by completing weekly tasks geared towards building a mutual

intercultural understanding and thereby leading to intercultural competence. The tasks comprised introducing themselves, talking about their university education, traditions, lifestyle, hobbies, gastronomy, interviewing each other about a cultural trait and making a video.

2.2.   Data collection and analysis

The study adopted a qualitative approach and data were gathered from various sources, namely, online blogs, two questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the project, and interviews conducted individually on its conclusion. Finally, a survey in the form of a questionnaire consisting of ten statements was completed by the participants to collate more data. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used to gauge the students' reactions to the project.

3.   Results

Interestingly, almost all the participants claimed in the final questionnaire and interview that their learning experience had been positive and that they had enhanced their knowledge of their counterparts' university education, traditions, lifestyle, hobbies, food, religion and music. Due to the asynchronous nature of social networking, they were able to reflect upon their own views on the aforementioned items before understanding their peers' comments on their respective cultural features. As certain participants reported, the tasks they had to perform online aroused their curiosity, which increased their motivation to discover and discuss pertinent information about each other's culture.

Whilst the Spanish participants stated that their reflecting upon their peers' comments enabled them to understand certain cultural traits that were different from theirs, some of their Mauritian counterparts said that although the responses they read were informative, they occasionally found it difficult to follow the thread of the discussion; this was due either to their lack of knowledge of, or simply disinterest in, the subject. Others also mentioned that they were not acquainted with the idea of reflecting upon their peers' responses, which resulted in their unsuccessful completion of the task.

Most participants mentioned that they had benefited from sharing information with their peers, which assisted them in developing collaborative and independent learning skills. As several indicated, as a result of the amount of information they had exchanged, there was enough scope for critical reflection to take place;

meanwhile, those who did not perform their tasks effectively thought differently, attributing this failure either to a lack of time or the unavailability of internet access.

4. Discussion

Judging from the participants' reaction to their engagement in the tasks they performed, internet-based activities may be considered meaningful in the learning process and can increase students' motivation (Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005). The findings suggest that such online collaborative tasks can aid students to gain cross-cultural awareness and develop intercultural communicative skills, which, as a result, might be useful to enrich their learning experience. Furthermore, a rich learning environment may be conducive for learners to become interculturally competent (Pollak, 2010). However, due to the participants' lack of experience in performing some of the tasks, clear instructions should be provided and the subject of discussion carefully chosen so that students may benefit from their thought-provoking nature during their interaction; in this way, they may be encouraged to be critical, an aspect deemed essential in intercultural competence.

The fact that the participants reported a high degree of motivation in social interaction online indicates that they were able to manage their learning autonomously (Ushioda, 2006). Therefore, in order for learning goals to be achieved, it is of the utmost importance that teachers should encourage their students to perform their tasks successfully. Another important aspect in fostering learner autonomy is critical reflection through collaborative tasks online (Swienhorst, 2008). In the case of those participants who engaged in critical reflection, it suggests that they exhibited the capacity to take the initiative and manage their learning more effectively than others, as pointed out by Lee (2011).

Arguably, it can be inferred from the findings that students should seek the help of their peers when interacting online in order to achieve their goals as independent learners. Social networking can provide the opportunity for learners to develop such skills if they are afforded proper guidance by their instructor.

5. Conclusions

This study has shed some light on how social networking can foster intercultural competence and autonomous learning. Students are able to discover aspects relating to each other's culture in a virtual environment which is conducive for learning to take place. The learning tasks provided them with the opportunity to ponder both their own and their peers' thoughts to achieve that aim. Social networking seems

to be an appropriate platform for students to negotiate meaning and construct knowledge together, since they can plan their own learning approach at their own pace. They feel less intimidated when expressing their views as there is no peer pressure similar to that which tends to prevail in face-to-face classes. As a result, the outcome is meaningful learning. However, because of the small-scale nature of this study, the findings cannot be generalized. Hopefully further research in this field will contribute to benefiting the learning process.

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