A Facebook project for pre-service language teachers

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Abstract. This report is based on an action research study conducted in an English language course with a group of low-residency students of a teacher education master's program: *Multilingual Technologies of Early Childhood Education*, at Kazan Federal University. A Social Networking Site (SNS), Facebook, was used as a platform for practising and developing the students' teaching skills. The purpose of the study was to show the students the potential educational value of Facebook in teaching English to preschool children. The data sources include pre- and post-project questionnaires, interviews with students, field notes, and the reflective diary of the instructor-researcher. The results show that while designing an educational page on Facebook, the students changed their attitude towards the educational value of SNSs and acquired knowledge and skills necessary for implementing SNSs into their teaching practices. The research findings will be of interest to English language educators, especially foreign language teachers involved in early childhood education, and to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) practitioners.

Keywords: CALL, Facebook, SNS, pre-service teacher training.

1. Introduction

Recent studies demonstrate that social networking sites (SNS) can be effectively integrated into a foreign language curriculum (Harrison, 2013; Leier & Cunningham, 2016). Facebook, as one of the most popular SNSs, can serve as a tool to help students improve motivation, social interaction, and language learning skills (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011). Still, some teachers are skeptical about the educational value of SNSs and see them as a social/

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entertainment tool (Peeters, 2015). As our pre-project questionnaire revealed, students of a teacher education master's program (age group under 30 years old) use Facebook and other SNSs only for their everyday personal interactions and never in their teaching practice. Student-teachers need examples and models of how SNSs can be used in education successfully (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012).

Teachers' unwillingness to integrate SNSs in the language classroom is often rooted in inadequate teacher-training. Unfortunately, not all teacher-training programs include courses that focus specifically on how to use social networks and other CALL tools for teaching languages. Still, such training could be provided within other courses (Leier & Cunningham, 2016). This report describes action research in progress that focuses on the efforts of one instructor to change the attitudes of her pre-service foreign language teachers towards the educational value of Facebook in an English language course. Students were given a choice of any SNS, but they chose Facebook due to its informal character and worldwide popularity.

2.   Method

The study involved an instructor and her low-residency students (N=14) of a teacher education master's program offered in Kazan Federal University in the winter-spring 2017 semester. The purpose of the research was to examine and evaluate the effects of a Facebook-related project that the instructor integrated into her English language course to attempt to change the attitudes of students towards the use of Facebook as an educational tool. We formulated the following research questions:

• What are the students' attitudes towards SNSs as an educational tool?

• Do the students feel they have gained knowledge and skills to implement an educational page on Facebook in their teaching practice?

Data was collected from project activities: the students completed a pre-project questionnaire, wrote a report, developed their project on Facebook, and completed a final self-reflection questionnaire. Data sources also included field notes and the reflective diary of the instructor-researcher.

The pre-test consisted of (1) a questionnaire on students' attitudes to social networking and (2) a written report on the possible effects of SNSs on students with reference to their involvement in social activities and academic performance. The following task was given:

You have been asked to write a report on the effects of social networking sites on students, with reference to their involvement in social activities and their academic performance. You should make recommendations for addressing problem areas. Write your report in 250-300 words.

Then the students were asked to create an educational page on Facebook named "Kid Family English" (https://www.facebook.com/Kid-Family-English-510355809352691/?fref=ts). They worked in small groups of two and three to create short lessons for kids and their parents. During this Facebook-related project, the students were asked to complete post-project questionnaires (a final self-reflection questionnaire) and interviews.

3. Discussion

The pre-project questionnaire showed that all students have accounts in SNSs (Facebook, Vkontakte, and WhatsApp) and six students have had accounts in Twitter and Instagram for more than three years. They use these SNSs to participate in social events, chat with friends, connect with relatives, and share photos/videos. Most of the students (N=10) said that they use Facebook to keep in touch with friends from other countries. The pre-project report written by students at the beginning of the Facebook project revealed that all students (N=14) admitted the positive influence of social networking on everyday life, but most of them (N=12) did not see SNSs as valuable tools for language learning and teaching. Only two students wrote that SNSs "might improve academic performance if planned well" or could be used for "arranging online conferences".

While designing an educational page, "Kid Family English", and developing the content, the students collaborated with peers and the instructor. Each lesson they posted on Facebook was discussed during the class when students shared experiences, concerns, and reported about the progress.

The post-project questionnaires and interviews with the students revealed two major challenges. First, students found it difficult to upload video/audio as well as to shoot the appropriate video-lesson, thus showing their inadequate technical skills. Second, the students demonstrated low engagement and motivation that could be attributed to the fact that they were not graded on this assignment and their Facebook projects were not a part of their overall course evaluation. Similar findings linking motivation to grading policies are reported elsewhere (see, for example, Cao & Hong, 2011).

In the final self-reflection questionnaire, the students were asked to answer the questions concerning:

- their attitude towards Facebook as an educational tool;

- their feelings as teachers while designing "Kid Family English";

- their plans for using SNSs in their future teaching practice;

- benefits of "Kid Family English" for young learners and teachers;

- their thoughts about integrating SNSs in the English language classroom.

With the help of a student-oriented project focused on designing a language learning page on Facebook, the results show that students have changed their attitude and see SNSs as valuable tools for language learning and teaching. This is indicated by findings from their final self-reflection questionnaire:

> "Now I think that Facebook can be used by teachers as an educational tool. Prior to the lesson preparation, I did a lot of research and it was a surprise to me that so many teachers actually use Facebook as an educational tool".

> "Before participating in this Project I used Facebook only as a social networking [site] in order to communicate with my friends from another countries [sic]. Now I see that [with] the help of Facebook we really can teach and learn".

> "To tell the truth, I didn't expect any emotions from this Project. And I was surprised when I enjoyed participating in such kind of work [sic]. You feel satisfied if everything goes in the way you wanted. Now I think that it is interesting kind of work. And this project give me [sic] a great opportunity to do what I have not done before".

4.   Conclusions

The research indicates that the students of the teacher education master's program *Multilingual Technologies of Early Childhood Education*, acquired understanding of the educational value of Facebook, learned how to develop the content and

design the page, as well as how to collaborate with peers, followers, and the instructor. The results suggest the need to integrate a Facebook project assessment into the overall evaluation of the course, which may compensate for the lack of external motivation. Instructors could be recommended to create their own pages to demonstrate the potential of SNSs and model the final product. The research findings will help to inform language practitioners and developers of language teacher training programs. They reveal the importance of teaching training in the use of SNSs.

5.   Acknowledgements

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