

WHATSAPP AS A SITE FOR MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE

Conor Keogh and Heydy Robles
Universidad del Norte, Colombia

ABSTRACT

Smart-phone technology is pervasive across Colombia, even among those of lower economic means. This has greatly changed the face of society and the world of education is no different. Instant messaging services like WhatsApp allow for an extension of the traditional classroom. This study is concerned with how such technology allows learners of a second language a space where true dialogue and meaningful interaction may occur.

This report presents progress of an ongoing investigation into how a shared WhatsApp group may be used as a site for dialogue for students of International Relations. The study consists of analysis of the interaction which occurs in the group as well as learner reflection on the benefits of the space.

The data generated thus far have demonstrated examples of interaction between participants in their second language on complex themes related to their country and the international community. Participant responses have been positive on the benefits of the space.

The study adds further credence to a growing body of work on the benefits of such a space for encouraging discussion, participation and enhancement of learner identity.

KEYWORDS

Mobile Learning, Dialogue, Virtual Spaces, Community of Learners, WhatsApp, Blended Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, teachers' pedagogical practices try to establish dialogical communications in an effort to avoid imposition of monological positions or discourses. However, there is still a resistance towards changing teaching methods in order to privilege students, and allowing them to make decisions. The role of the traditional teacher tends to result in pedagogical discourses that suppress student voices (Drewery, 2005). If educators consider themselves to be the ones who always know best, instead of fostering critical awareness, they assume rigid and imposing positions which may leave their students with uncritical opinions that may lead them to oppressive social practices (Giroux & McLaren, 1998).

The revolutionary concept of dialogism was introduced for the first time by Bakhtin (1986), who emphasized that all the power of language is generated in the relationship with others, that is, in dialogue. In the process of interaction with the other, it is when a subject is really formed; "...the *I* only exists in so far as it is related to a *you*" (Bakhtin, 1982, p.102). It takes a speaker and an active interlocutor to generate dialogues.

Furthermore, Bakhtin (1986) explains why language should point to a dialogical process. In other words, the listener's opinions are recognized and accepted, therefore favouring an active understanding. It is necessary for teachers to be aware of students' 'voices in order to identify their beliefs, ideologies, social and cultural contexts in order to build meaningful knowledge and break with traditional paradigms that are dedicated to eliminating or ignoring voices. Regarding this, Wegerif (2013) argues that education must be dialogic in order to empower voices. This implies "the ability to participate in dialogues constructively without the need to oppress or be oppressed" (p.35).

The variety in emergent technologies in schooling has grown enormously in recent years. Currently, teachers of different disciplines in higher education are integrating technology to support students' learning processes. In particular, the implementation of mobile technology in the classroom has become a unique way to innovate teachers' pedagogical practice (Fraga & Flores, 2011; Herrington et al, 2011; Park, 2011). Mobile learning refers to the use of such devices for academic purposes. Some examples of equipment used for this purpose include cell phones, smart phones, laptops, tablets, and audio players, among others

(Kukulka-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). The use of mobile instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp in classes has allowed students to construct meaningful knowledge and to have peer support through synchronous discussions (Hou & Wu, 2011; Ngambi & Brown, 2009; Scornavacca et al., 2016)

The increased focus on the importance of classroom interaction and the potential benefits of a dialogic approach within education has coincided with the establishment of additional educational spaces made possible by the development of such technology. The ubiquitous presence of smartphones is simply a modern fact of life and one which is having dynamic effects on nearly all walks of life in the 21st century. The effects of this technology, be they interpreted negatively or positively, are keenly debated by many within education, with many questioning if the devices should be prohibited within schools. What can be under no dispute is the fact that smartphones have changed the manner in which communication occurs. Social networks, web forum and various apps such as WhatsApp have created virtual spheres where communication can take place. Despite questions over the benefits or otherwise of smartphone technology, the premise of this study is that such a space as created by a WhatsApp group, offers learners an additional field where communication can take place in a meaningful manner outside of traditional class times. Furthermore, this technology provides an opportunity to surpass the traditional barrier between classroom and leisure time, meaning that learners in the 21st century are increasingly blurring the line between work and play (Coffin, 2009). Research into the area has indicated that learners of a second language have benefitted from the use of WhatsApp in terms of exposure to the language (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016) and that the use of WhatsApp groups have had a positive impact on interaction and rapport among learners (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014, Keogh, 2017). This current study is seeking to build on this emerging body of work in order to explore how such a virtual chat offers learners an ongoing, portable and dynamic space where they may enter into enriching dialogue which is "...reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful" (Alexander, 2008, p 13).

2. PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the study are students of International Relations English from a private university in the north of Colombia. They form part of an 8 level English for International Relations program and they range in age from 17-21. Thus far in the study there has been 25 participants (8 at level 2 in the first cycle of the study from the second semester of 2016, 17 at level 6 from the second cycle in the second semester of 2017). The students take four hours of English per week across a sixteen week university term as part of their undergraduate degree. The level 2 students should boast a pre-intermediate (A2) level of English according to the Common European Framework, while the level 6 students are at an intermediate level (B1). The third cycle of the study has begun recently with a further 20 students from level 7 (B1-B2 level). These learners share the WhatsApp group space throughout the whole semester along with their teacher (one of the co-authors of this paper). The responsibility of the teacher in this instance has been to encourage the students to offer opinions and discuss topics by posting discussion prompts. The learners have been encouraged to participate and engage in discussion but their participation has not been obligatory.

3. METHODS

In order to explore how instant messaging apps like WhatsApp could offer additional spaces for dialogue, participants in the study have been encouraged to extend discussion of topics covered during class time to the space offered by a shared WhatsApp group. At times this has been assigned as homework tasks with students given a prompt to discuss in the group. Furthermore, participants have been encouraged to initiate their own discussions on topics of interest to them. The topics discussed have related mainly to political issues and societal debates related to Colombia and beyond. It was hoped that this additional space would provide a safe space where all of the participants could feel confident to voice their opinion, something which does not always occur within the classroom due to factors ranging from confidence in linguistic competence to learner identity and issues of anxiety.

In one sense, the WhatsApp group space is an ideal format to assess learner participation and interaction as the space opens a continuous dialogue between group members with all of the interactions saved and accessible for analysis at a later date. The principal instrument in this study is therefore the group space itself and the interactions which have occurred there. All of the interactions throughout each cycle of the study have been recorded using screenshots. These interactions are then reviewed by the co-authors and relevant examples where meaningful examples of discussion and dialogue are identified are then selected for analysis. These conversations have been analysed with a particular focus on turn taking and learner participation as well as reflections on the content of these interactions. While the nature of the dialogue itself is obviously of huge importance, the perception of this dialogue within this additional space on behalf of the participants is also sought to gain a perspective of what value, if any, participants attribute to the additional space. In order to achieve this, participants have provided feedback related to the space and its uses.

4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Some of early data to emerge from the study was interesting as it was in relation to a discussion in the level 2 group. The topic discussed was a keenly debated decision by the then Minister of Education to include educational content relating to gender and sexual diversity in the national school curriculum. The issue prompted controversy among conservative elements of society and also polarised opinion on a national level. It provided a topic that learners at that level of language proficiency and academic experience (the participants were first and second semester students) might be reluctant to voice opinions on. However, the WhatsApp group space (Figure 1) afforded a more comfortable setting for discussion.

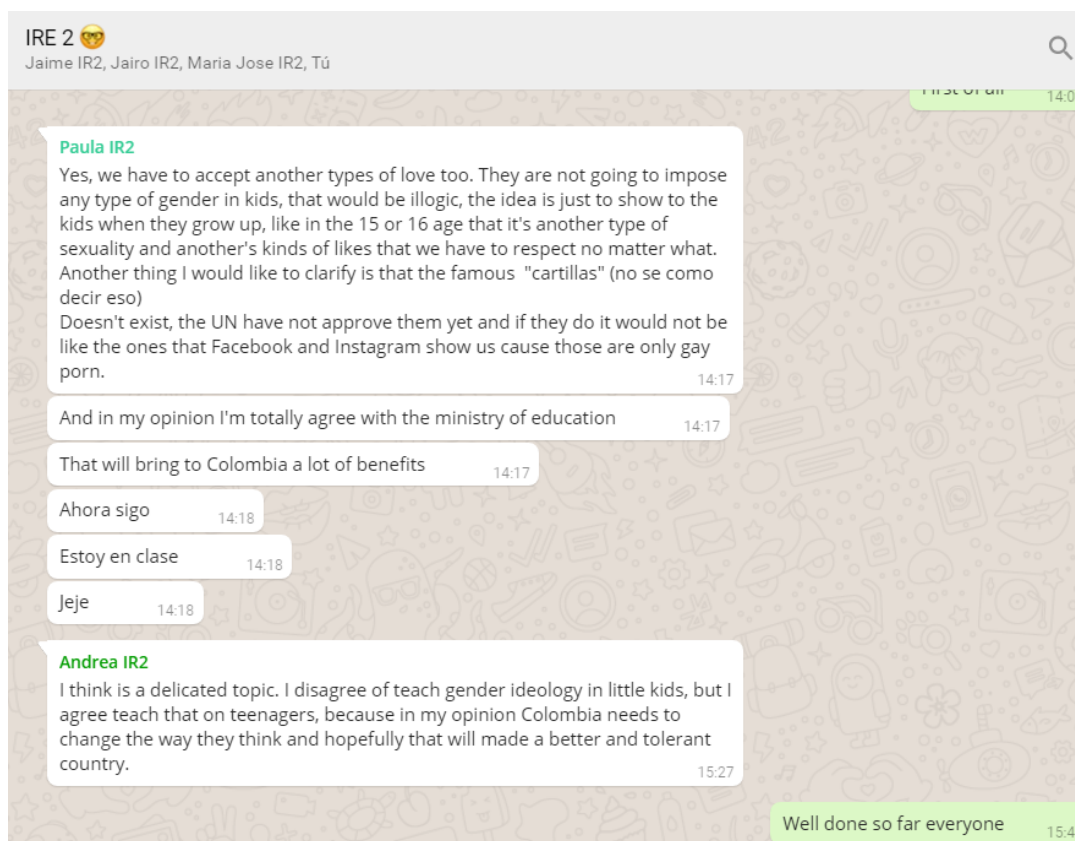


Figure 1. Excerpt of Interaction from Level 2 Group (2016)

Furthermore, the level 6 participants demonstrated how the group space can offer students an extended space beyond class time where concepts covered in class (the language of othering in this instance) could be discussed in relation to examples from the world they see around them (Figure 2).

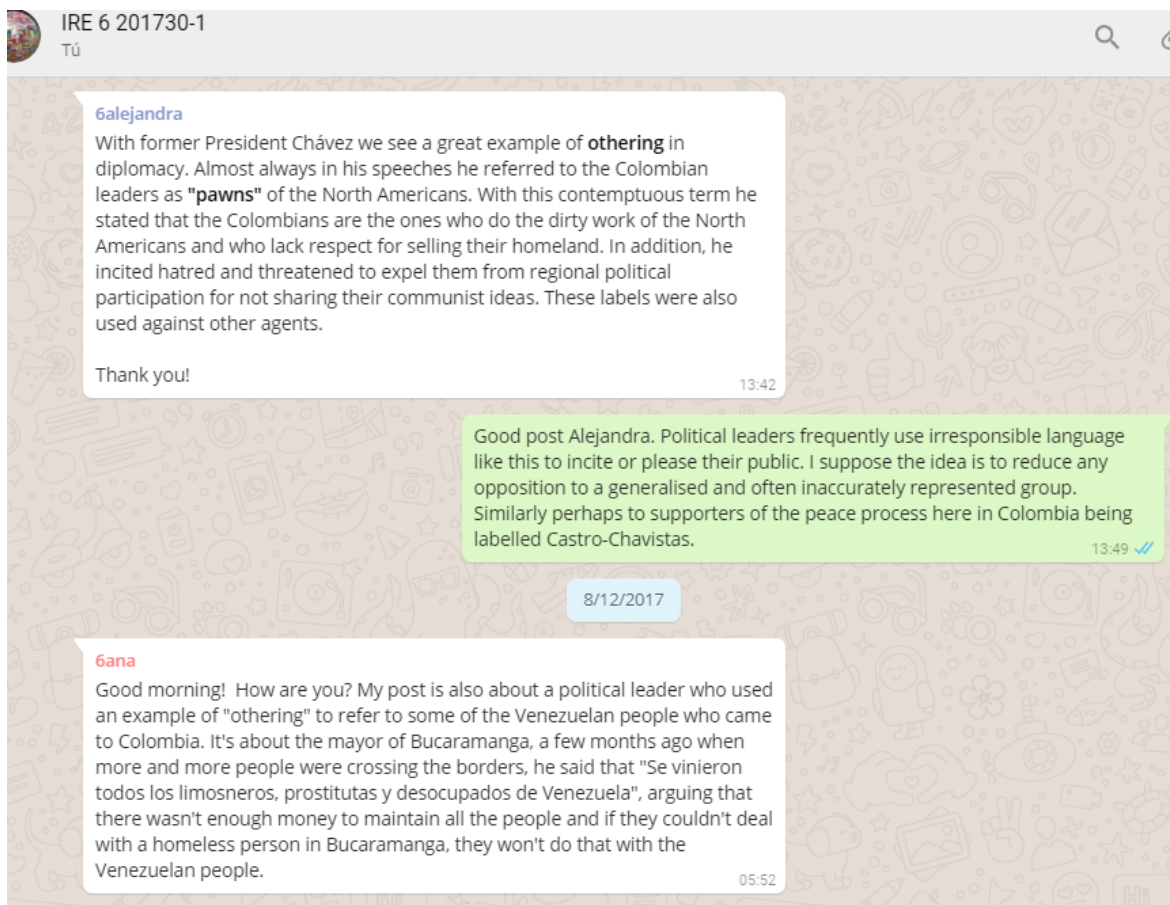


Figure 2. Excerpt of interaction from Level 6 group (2017)

5. PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The interactions between teachers and students have always been one of the most recurrent and studied subjects in scientific research due to the control of the teacher's speech in the classroom and of the students' voices without being heard (monological and traditional approaches). The use of WhatsApp in this study has been meaningful for students in that it has created an additional space beyond the traditional classroom where topics developed in class can be further elaborated on and new topics, be they prompted by the teacher or the students themselves, may be discussed. Furthermore, there has been indications that learners view such a group as a "safe space" where voices which are often silent within the four walls of the classroom offer their opinion, something which has been indicated through previous work on behalf of the author (Keogh, 2017). As the study moves into its third cycle, the benefits of the WhatsApp group as a site for meaningful and fulfilling interaction will continue to be explored as will how the space is perceived by its participants.

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