The role of social media in foreign language teaching: A case study for French

Le rôle des médias sociaux dans l’enseignement des langues étrangères : une étude de cas pour le FLE

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1. Introduction

“He who dares to teach must never cease to learn”
(John Cotton Dana, 1912)

1 The Common European Framework of References for Languages, introduced in 2001, provided a structure for measuring communicative competences in foreign languages, placing considerable emphasis on “using a language for independent communication” (Council of Europe 2011). As technological developments advanced, so did the way in which languages were taught. The shift from a behaviourist approach to language teaching, where drills and repetition were the modus operandi, to a social-cultural approach (Harrison & Thomas 2009) was facilitated by a departure from the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) packages to online resources and communities, as language teachers sought to maximise the opportunities for students to access authentic material and native speakers.

2 The arrival of Web 2.0 tools, which encourage users to generate content and share experiences and opinions, has provided foreign language teachers with a unique opportunity to tap into an authentic environment for their students. Higher Education has seen a marked increase in the use of social media as a teaching tool (Bax 2011, Gouseti 2010, Blankenship 2011).
Considerable research has been carried out on the use of individual social media tools, such as social networking sites (Clark & Gruba 2010, Brick 2012), blogs (Hourigan & Murray 2010) and wikis. Wang & Vasquez (2012) suggest that, while blogs and wikis are popular, the use of social networking applications for language learning is less frequent. However, Laru et al. (2012) argue that there is very little formal research on the integration of multiple tools to support learning.

The purpose of this study was to explore how the use of multiple social media tools could complement traditional language teaching/learning and whether students learning a foreign language (L2) were receptive to the use of these tools within an Irish educational context for language learning.

2. Context

The backdrop for this study is the negative perception that many students in Ireland have of language learning. The reasons are multifarious. A report by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in Ireland (NCCA) indicated that “perceived difficulty is high and interest lowest in languages” (2007: 20). Lower levels of literacy, as noted by the International PISA assessment (OECD 2010), contribute to the difficulty students have with learning a second language. Finally, the “twitchspeed attention span” (Prensky 1998) of this generation of learners, makes engaging with the traditional practices in teaching more difficult.

2.1. “Digital Natives” - a new generation of digitally literate learners?

Marc Prensky (2001) wrote about a fundamental change in the way young people interacted with technology. At a time when the Internet became more accessible to the mass market, a new generation of “digital natives”, born between 1977 and 1995, grew up surrounded by technology and became accustomed to using new media throughout their daily lives. The following observation, from an Irish marketing student, clearly reveals how this generation now functions in modern society:

We are “plugged in” 24/7, can source all the necessary information [...] in a matter of seconds and we will make sure to share it with our friends via Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, texting, blogging or instant messaging. Our generation is very good at multitasking so don't be surprised if we use the above-mentioned media all at the same time (Sablovscaia 2010).

In 2010, a report by Harris Interactive indicated that 18-24 year olds spent at least 4.5 hours online daily (cf. Figure 1).
The graph, which shows the increase in Internet use since 2006, illustrates the link between increased access to the Internet and the introduction of smartphones, tablet computers and other mobile devices.

This generation, who is always “plugged in”, (Baird & Fisher 2006) will have been exposed to thousands of hours of media by the time they reach university and will be at ease with the forms of media, from online chat rooms to virtual worlds and digital games (Evans, Haughey & Murphy 2008: 389).

A study conducted by McCann WorldGroup in 2011 showed that from the 7000 young people they surveyed, 53 % aged 16-22 and 48 % aged 23-30 said they would rather give up their sense of smell than an item of technology. Technology is part of their identity and has become a “fifth sense” for this generation.

2.2. Using social media in an educational context

Social media has been described as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Heinlein 2010).

Classifying social media tools according to their purpose is a particularly useful exercise given the transient nature of many of the websites (Mc Dermott 2011). Frédéric Cavazza’s illustration below shows the multitude of tools currently available.
Prensky (2001) argued that learners sitting in today’s classrooms are used to high-speed, graphically-rich, globally accessible resources and are “powering down” when they enter the classroom.

The advent of smartphones, tablet computers and on campus Wi-Fi means that students are always connected, sharing, publishing, playing and networking (Cavazza 2012). However, it cannot be presumed that students are aware of the pedagogical value of these tools. The challenge for educators is to show students how social media can be used to achieve learning.

Pedagogical tools such as Bloom’s digital taxonomy can assist educators in choosing the right social media tool for the learning they wish to encourage. This taxonomy is based on Bloom’s original taxonomy, created in 1956. Together with a group of educational psychologists, Benjamin Bloom developed a “classification of levels of intellectual behaviour important in learning” (Bloom 1956, as cited in Anderson et al. 2001). This classification of learning objectives divided educational objectives into three distinct areas, cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. Bloom’s original taxonomy has become the cornerstone of teacher training in many educational settings. Figure 3 shows how the taxonomy appeared originally:
The taxonomy adopts a bottom-up approach, with the lower order skills of knowledge and comprehension at the base. Gradually, a learner should acquire the higher order skills of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation as he/she moves along the learning journey.

The original taxonomy was revised in 2001 by Anderson et al., to include active verbs instead of nouns (as an example, see Figure 4 below, from Churches 2012). Understanding and remembering are now regarded as the lower order skills, while higher order skills include applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. The taxonomy also provides more detail relating to the key skills at each level, with examples of how a student could complete an activity to demonstrate the relevant skill. Since the higher level skills depend on having attained the required knowledge and skills at the lower levels, this taxonomy is often used for curriculum design. Churches further classifies digital skills that students may acquire as they navigate the social media landscape in the context of the taxonomy. This can help educators to see the value in social media activities, while implementing a standards-based curriculum.
In the taxonomy above, the traditional Higher Order Thinking Skills are highlighted in bold, while the newer digital skills are listed thereafter. The communication spectrum is also a new addition to the taxonomy, since it attempts to categorise social media tools according to the tasks they can be used to accomplish, placing emphasis on the activity rather than the technology.

2.3. The virtual learning environment as a social tool

Moodle (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is underpinned by a social constructivist approach to learning and has a number of social media tools included in its installation, such as forums, wikis, blogs and chat rooms. The tools promote both individual and collaborative learning (McDermott 2011) and enrich the learning environment for students. With Moodle, the learner is the one who builds knowledge and meaning internally and allows social interactions to play a large role in determining how this knowledge is constructed (Wagner 2006). Since Moodle can be set up as a secure site where students must log in to access resources, it provides participants (both practitioners and learners) with a secure environment in which to develop their knowledge and test the validity of these social media tools (McDermott 2011) within their discipline. Furthermore, there is a growing community of Moodle advocates using social media tools to educate themselves, so that they can maximise the benefits of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for their students.
3. Methodology

In this single-case study the students were provided with multiple social media tools, in addition to face-to-face activities for their language learning. Moodle was used as the VLE, since this is the environment, with which the students were most familiar. While the participants in this study had used Moodle as a course management tool, they had not been exposed to the social tools that it can provide. The forum activity within Moodle provided the students with an opportunity to create and share content. An external blog was created by each student using Wordpress, a popular blogging tool, and a Facebook page was created for the group to facilitate communication.

Since this study sought to examine the students’ response to the use of multiple social media tools within an educational context, a qualitative approach was taken to the research. Nunan (1992: 4) refers to an “exploratory-interpretive research paradigm”. The data collected is qualitative and the research paradigm yields an interpretative analysis of those data. As researchers are concerned with the subjective experiences of the individual, participant observation is an important research approach (Thomas 2010: 295).

The focus for this study is on French as a foreign language, taught at post-primary level (Level A2.1) in an English-speaking environment.

Participants

The participants consisted of 23 undergraduate students, in the first year of their study. Twelve participants were following a programme of study in social care, while the remaining participants were studying either business or office management. Although the main language used by the group was English, this was not the first language (L1) for all participants. The following chart shows the breakdown of Irish, Polish, Iraqi, Brazilian and Nigerian nationalities represented within the group.

![Figure 5. Breakdown of participant nationalities](image)

At the time of the study, 19 students had completed five years of French at second level; one
student had three years’ experience at second level; one student was a beginner and two
had completed various language courses in their home country. The module was
delivered over a 13-week semester from January to April 2012. Business and Office
Management students had six contact hours per week for the L2, while the students
studying social care had three contact hours per week for this module. This was not a
mandatory component of the students’ respective programme, and was one of four
electives available to students.

4. The study

Moodle was used as the platform for course administration. It was adopted by the
author’s institute in 2003, but its use was limited in many cases to that of a document
repository. However the social media tools, such as the forum activity referred to in this
study, can provide students with an opportunity to create and share content.

Traditional language teaching resources, such as PowerPoint presentations, pdfs and
links to interactive websites were posted on the VLE, together with the relevant links to
the social media tools adopted, i.e. Facebook and Wordpress. Authentic content in the
target language was provided through the use of Youtube clips and websites. Individual
and group learning activities were constructed around these resources.

Bhatt (2005) describes the blog, or “web log” as an online space for users to write and
gather information about a particular topic. The purpose of the student blogs was to
provide a space to gather information about a topic relating to a particular element of
French culture. Wordpress (http://www.wordpress.com) was chosen because of its
popularity at the time the study was undertaken.

According to a recent survey amongst first year students in one Higher Education
Institute (Mc Dermott 2011), students visited their favourite social networking site (SNS)
several times a day to send messages, view updates from friends and look at friends’
photos. Since this site was Facebook, it was decided to use this SNS for the study. While
the author created and remained the administrator of the Facebook page, students were
encouraged to post in the target language about anything relevant to the module.

The decision not to correct erroneous language posted to the SNS was deliberate, since
the primary objective of this tool was to create a social environment where learners could
communicate in the target language without the fear of being corrected. Johnson (2008:
335) identified the need for language learners to develop the skill to keep producing
language even though they know they are making mistakes. By concentrating on what the
students said and not how they said it (Keegan 2010), the focus was on the message
communicated.

The students were asked to enter a competition to design the Facebook profile picture for
the official course page on Facebook. Each of the entries was posted on the VLE and a
winner was chosen through a student voting mechanism (Moodle choice activity). The
only criterion for the competition was to represent the link between the learner's college
and France. Below is the winning entry.
To facilitate the integration of the SNS and the VLE, the course Facebook page feed was embedded into the Moodle course page. Since two students did not have a Facebook account, this allowed them to have some access to the material posted on the social networking site.

5. Data collection

The following sections deal with the data collection methods for each of the social media activities. In addition, student reaction to the use of multiple social media tools was recorded in an online survey.

5.1. Forums

Moodle forums were used as a formative exercise and the participants were asked to complete five forum activities in the target language. Kol & Scholnik (2008) refer to the usefulness of forums for developing interactive competence and social skills in the target language. Asynchronous forum activities, in particular, provide an opportunity for “encouraging thoughtful communication in the language, allowing for the development of writing skills and providing a framework for text discussion” (Idem: 53). Three of the forum entries were on topics relating to their personal information and two forum entries were specifically related to a cultural topic detailed in the curriculum. The participants were asked to provide short posts and respond to other entries. Activity logs provided data relating to the number of posts/replies for each forum activity.

5.2. Blog (Wordpress)

The participants were also asked to create a blog to research and present an aspect of culture in France or another French-speaking country. In order to familiarize the students with the features of Wordpress, a one-hour tutorial was held on how to set up and customize the design of their blog and how to add posts. For their coursework the participants were required to include relevant information and media about the chosen theme. The topics included French fashion, football, martial arts, French cuisine and French tourist destinations and a minimum of five posts was required. The participants
presented their blogs to the group as part of their graded coursework during week nine of the module. Notes were taken during the student presentations, to record participant engagement. A group discussion was chosen as a means of collecting data on student receptiveness to the social media tool.

5.3. Social Networking Site (Facebook)

Since the SNS was used primarily for communication, engagement with this tool was optional. The number of “likes” and posts during the period of the study provided data on the use of the social media tool. The type of post provided qualitative data on how the students tended to use the SNS, i.e. primarily for contacting each other or for sharing information relating to the module.

Finally, the participants also completed an online questionnaire at the end of the module, to measure their response to the use of multiple social media tools. The questionnaire included a combination of open-ended questions and Likert-scale style statements.

6. Results

The results will be presented thematically, with results from observations relating to each of the social media tools and also results from the questionnaire, relating to the use of multiple tools.

6.1. Moodle forums

Participation in the Moodle forums was poor for weeks 1 and 2, with only two of the respondents choosing to post a forum entry. While the number of posts on the forums increased in the subsequent weeks, the only forum to have posts from the whole group was the cultural forum on Quebec, which followed an in-class activity. Although the students were positively disposed towards the forum activity when queried, saying that they could learn from each other, motivation was not as high as for the graded activities. None of the participants posted a comment on another student’s forum, even though it was specified in the brief given to the students at the beginning of the activity. The fact that this was not a mandatory part of the exercise could have been a deciding factor for them.

6.2. Blog

The participants demonstrated high levels of engagement when presenting the blogs to their peers. Subsequent group discussions indicated that they enjoyed putting the blog together, although some of the students “weren’t sure how it would work” initially, since they had never created a blog before. Again, as with the forums, students did not comment on each other’s blogs.

6.3. Social Networking Site

While Facebook was a familiar SNS, the participants had not considered its potential in communicating with native speakers. Exchanges between a visiting lecturer and the
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group were facilitated through Facebook and the participants noted a positive response to this activity on the SNS.

The SNS records the posts/comments made by participants. Over the period from January 9th to May 22nd 2012, a total of 35 posts were made by the SNS administrator/course tutor. There were 161 comments and 63 “likes” in response to these posts.

6.4. Questionnaire

At the end of the module, the students were also asked to complete a simple questionnaire and rate the use of each element within the module, using a Likert scale approach. The graph below shows the time frame for participant responses, indicating the period when students responded to the survey.

Figure 7. Daily responses to the questionnaire

Figure 8 below shows how the students rated the overall design on the VLE Moodle. All respondents gave a positive reaction to the design of the Moodle course page.

Figure 8. Students’ rating of course design on Moodle
Figure 9 shows how the participants rated the use of the SNS, Facebook, and the Wordpress blog for the module. A positive response was given to the inclusion of these social media tools by 72% of the participants, with one participant giving a “poor” response.

**Figure 9. Students’ rating of the use of SNS & blog**

Figure 10 shows the students’ responses to the use of multiple social media tools for the development of written skills, i.e. the blog and the Moodle forums. A total of 96% of the participants responded very positively with the remaining respondents choosing not to reply to this question.

**Figure 10. Student responses to the use of multiple social media tools**

An open-ended question provided the students with the opportunity to give further feedback. Most comments related to the delivery of the course in general and did not relate to specific social media tools. Below is a sample of the comments made:

- “class [was] interesting”;
- “subject [was] fun and made me more interested in French”.
7. Discussion

During the study, it became apparent that, although the participants were positively disposed towards the use of multiple social media tools for language learning, engagement with the tools was most effective when there was a direct incentive (i.e. a grade). There was a need to explain the reason for choosing each social media tool at the beginning of each activity, so that the participants were aware of the pedagogical value of using each tool in the context of achieving the module learning objectives.

Another point worth noting is that the participants were initially hesitant to use information posted in their peers’ forum entries or blog/SNS posts, because it was perceived as copying. However, once the concept of peer learning was discussed with the group and assurances were given that they would not be penalised if they referred to another student’s post, they were happy to use the opportunity to learn from each other.

Finally, the research also highlighted deficiencies in the students’ technical knowledge of using some of the social media tools. None of the participants had ever created a blog and many had not participated in an online forum. Nonetheless, this was not considered an inhibitor by the participants and they quickly overcame any difficulties they encountered.

The results show that the students were receptive to the use of social media for language learning. The study suggests that the integration of multiple social media tools for language learning can enhance the student’s experience, but the learning outcomes for each activity need to be clearly defined.

8. Conclusion

As this paper is based on a small-scale study, any conclusions drawn on the success of using multiple social media tools for language learning are tentative. Further research with a larger group of differing levels, ages and backgrounds would yield more comprehensive conclusions about the benefits of choosing a multi-faceted approach with social media tools for language learning.

Research on the pedagogy surrounding the use of Web 2.0 tools is still in its infancy; therefore many educators will have to make their decisions to adopt a particular tool based on traditional learning theories. However, the social media tools chosen for this study facilitated the interaction and observation in a group setting required for learning to take place (Kirriemuir & McFarlane 2004). This is of particular significance for language learners, where communication in a social setting plays a key role in developing linguistic competence.

While it took them some time to adapt to the use of social media tools within an educational context, most students engaged with the learning opportunities presented, and used the tools at their disposal to further their language skills. This supported the view put forward by Wang & Vasquez’s research (2012), which shows one of the main benefits of using Web 2.0 tools is the creation of a “favourable learning environment”. The generally positive response to this study would encourage integration of other social media tools in the education framework. Language teaching in particular lends itself to the openness that is inherent in these new media.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

While language teachers are quite used to using online resources in their teaching, the integration of social media is still relatively rare. However, since one of the key objectives of language teaching is to facilitate interaction and communication, language teachers should be encouraged to consider using these tools to make their students’ language learning experience richer in terms of authentic communication. The increased use of virtual learning environments (VLE) in Higher Education has facilitated greater student engagement with online activities and VLEs such as Moodle include many social media tools, allowing educators to incorporate them easily into the learning platform. The aim of this article is to examine how multiple social media tools could be used for teaching French as a foreign language as well as to report on the outcome of a single-case research project, which sought to establish students’ receptiveness towards the use of multiple social media tools for language learning.

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Mots-clés: français langue étrangère (FLE), Moodle, Irlande

Keywords: French as a foreign language, Ireland
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