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Facebook in foreign language teaching – a tool to improve communication competences

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Abstract

Facebook is a social media web application used by millions everyday. Students use it comfortably and frequently, as a means of genuine communication, mainly for keeping in touch with friends. Actually, we, as young adults, use Facebook as well, some of us extensively, as we acknowledge its excellent role in conveying verbal written messages and visuals. If Facebook is so good in promoting daily communication it should be also profitable in the school environment. Our research, which was developed with a group of students in French and another one in English, consists in creating a Facebook account for a foreign language class where digital “home assignments” are displayed. Our aim is to stimulate more involvement in the learning activity, mainly in the writing assignments. The research that started in the fall 2012 showed that Facebook has indeed a great potential as a means for teachers to reach to their students and experiment with learning methods. Students who had never written their homework before, started responding on Facebook to a variety of communicative assignments. Our conclusion is that since using Facebook the foreign language class has progressed towards an environment of genuine communication.

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1. Introduction

Our students in the foreign language class used to not write their homework. Was there any solution to make them write, to develop the writing competences that are stated in the national curriculum? As young teachers we found ourselves at a loss when we faced this situation. We normally use the face to face time in the class to mainly improve oral skills since the group of students provides a good opportunity for interaction, which is less likely to occur outside the class. Consequently writing skills are mainly focused in the home assignments. And there is where the trouble starts! Students do not get involved in the writing tasks which they do not find motivating enough. As teachers we cannot support them steadily since they are not in the class and we feel they no longer write at all. But if we reflect on both our teaching and communication practices as well as on our experiences as students in middle or

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high school we come to understand the inadequacies between formal education and the present life styles and social needs. There are many studies (Gardner, 2006; Veen & Vrakking, 2006; Sarivan&Singer, 2010; Sarivan, 2012) that show that the contemporary school is “out of step” when compared to the contemporary civilization. The first remains somehow clustered in the “sapiens” mindset whereas the second is highly “zappiens” (Veen &Vrakking, 2006). When it comes to communication the discrepancy is even greater. Most communication nowadays is digitalized. Yet, in school we still give students written assignments in notebooks. To them, not only the topics of the written tasks are “boring” but the very means to write homework are old fashioned. It seems there is a vicious circle between the written contents and the traditional vehicle that might convey that contents. Will there be any change if we turn to another vehicle than the pencil and paper? In our day and age students communicate a lot by means of the social media. And they do write to convey their ideas, thoughts, emotions etc. The ICT vehicle is actually their natural way to perform communication.

There are many ways to reach students through ICT as documented in a number of studies we observed (Means, B. et al. , 2009; Georgescu, 2010; Sarivan, 2011; Guerra, 2012). We chose to use Facebook because it seems the most popular way to keep in touch with friends and the world right now. Millions of people access Facebook every day (international counts say the total number of Facebook users in the world is estimated to be over 900 million people as of September 30, 2012; whereas 6 million Romanians are Facebook users (retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm>,<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/romania>)

Our intention was to benefit from Facebook popularity and use it as a means to engage students in writing in a foreign language, to change their perspective on homework, to optimise communication in the class. Our hypothesis was the following: If Facebook is an excellent way to promote daily communication it should be also profitable in the school environment.

Our project was designed as a frame project that involved common methodology and conceptualization. It was conducted with two groups of students in middle and high school coming from various social backgrounds who have access to the Internet and a Facebook profile.

More specifically, each group developed a new Facebook account that operates as a channel for: home assignments on behalf of the teacher, replies from the students and various feedback from both the students and the teachers. By means of technology we tried to sustain all that was initially at risk - standard tasks, motivation to write, difficult feedback, trust between the students and the teacher.

2. Methodology

2.1. General information on the project

The participating students come from two schools: sixth graders from Mihăilești Middle School (Buzău County, Romania) and ninth graders from Theoretical High School “Ion Luca Caragiale” Moreni (Dâmbovița County, Romania). The middle school students are working for the English class, while the high school students use Facebook to improve their French.

The sixth grade from Middle School Mihăilești is made up of nineteen students - nine girls and ten boys. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, most of them have reached an A2 level of English, while some are on A1, as shown in the initial competence test. They attend two English classes per week. At the beginning of the school year the students manifested little interest for the English class and for doing their homework. Moreover, they did not get actively involved during the English classes, showing little readiness. They were very reserved as far as their new teacher was concerned.

The high school grade consists of 31 students: 17 boys and 14 girls, coming from various social backgrounds. Based on the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the French level of most of them is A2+, while two of them have higher performances, according to the initial competence test. They have French classes three times a week. When the school year started, the students were displaying a reluctant attitude towards their French classes having in mind the stereotype that this language is not worth being learnt, as well as thinking that it can only be taught in a very conventional manner.

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