Using Social Networking Services to Promote Collaborated Learning in Addressing Differentiation in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, students spend a considerable amount of time a) online, and b) learning English at school and after school learning English. So I put the two together to promote extracurricular learning, leading to in class activities such as ongoing projects and oral presentations. The initial study began back in 2011, but the results that this particular study refer to 2013. Preliminary research for this current study was conducted with a class of 2nd year university students in a English conversation class. The class is an elective class consisting of students of varying levels of English competence who are united in the goal of wanting to improve their English vocabulary, conversation and cultural knowledge. The primary research consisted of a questionnaire which showed results that outside of school hours, students spent up to 5 hours a day using social networking services, primarily Facebook. Through this study I implemented a Facebook group designated to this class, and various projects were conducted though and using the Internet where the results were posted to the Facebook group page. The results up to now in this ongoing study show that the students are showing increased skills all round, despite the initial differentiation.

Key words: differentiation, extracurricular, social networking service, Facebook

Introduction

These days the Internet is an integral part of our lives and our students see their smart phones not merely as a

communication tool but as an extension of themselves. In my own teaching context, only one student out of hundreds does not have a smart phone. I first began to see the benefits of using smart phones with relation to learning when I downloaded my first education app 1 year ago. I had previously used the Internet as a classroom tool, but I decided to combine the two, as it was a way to not only confine learning to the classroom and to the home, but learning itself became mobile. Wherever a student took their smart phone, as long as there was an Internet connection, they were able to contribute to the class Facebook page.

Background

Previous research (Meurant (2008), Yang (2009), Yunus et al. (2012)) has looked into the use of Social Networking Services(hereby referred to as SNS) in EFL contexts. My research similarly specifically examine the use of SNS in the classroom, but as a tool for addressing the issue of differentiation in the classroom. At the beginning of the second semester of 2013, I took a class of second year elementary education undergraduates for an English conversation class. The class is a mixed department one, with students from five different departments. The student cohort was assigned randomly, not based on their English ability. As is usually the case with such classes that I have taught at university level, the initial competence in speaking varied greatly. Only having one two hour session every Monday with my students for fifteen weeks presented me with the situation of how to best teach the students, with the same course book, but to aim to increase their English speaking and confidence in their own English, at a comparatively equal level. Upon the results of the initial classroom questionnaire, it was discussed with the class, about using SNS in addition to the course book. I explained that it would be a meeting place for the students when not in the classroom, and that they could make the Facebook group their own, by contributing various articles, personal stories, and by completing set tasks by myself. All of which I monitored.

Method

Initially I created the Facebook group for the class, and I explained how to become a member of the group. I included an introductory message on the group page, and the first task was to introduce themselves to the group,

online. In between classes, I encouraged the students to use the group page as a method of keeping in touch with each other, in English, to as to foster a more friendly and relaxed environment when in the class the following week. Furthermore I used the group to set challenges, which constituted a proportion of the assessment criteria for the class, thereby creating a distinction between the group being a solely social output, and a relaxed environment to encourage participation in the class cohort, where the group was a part of the assessed criteria.

The challenges that I created were designed to set the students a task, an online task, whereby they were required to :

Research, in English (but I didn't stipulate the research must be in English, just the output), upload a photo and video related to the set task, and then the following week, to make a presentation using the material uploaded to the Facebook group.

One example of a task set was to make an oral presentation the following week of at least one minute, about their role model. Each student then researched, uploaded two photographs to the group page, with a written comment attached to each, and a 30 second video clip, also with a written comment. The students were further required to check the group page at least once daily, and to view and comment on their classmates' contributions. The following week, in class, students took it in turns to show their Facebook group entries on the screen for the students to see, and to use the photos and video as tools to aid in their oral presentations.

Conclusion

This is still an ongoing piece of research, but results up to now show that the students are enjoying the method of using SNS to aid in their learning. Past students from previous years still make contributions to the group page, which shows that the students did not only think of English as for their class, but also as a tool for communicating out of class, as for them it no longer has any bearing on their grades. The students also use Facebook to contact me between classes, and I also try to view and comment on their posts on the group page. The group serves a meeting place, learning tool, and communication tool both in and out of class.

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BIODATA

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