

Facebook as a tool of English language teaching: personal experience

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Abstract

In this article I want to share an experience using Facebook to teach English to Beginners at Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, campus Tuxtla (UNACH-Tuxtla). Facebook is used by many learners, and English is a lingua franca. Globalization uses information and communications technologies (ICT) and English to make people from different parts of the world interact. Can we as English teacher use Facebook to teach English in order to put in context the English language learning?

Keywords: Facebook, English, Context.

Facebook is a social network created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 with the purpose to keep in touch and make people interact inside a virtual community. Facebook is part of the new digital technologies which communicates people from different parts of the world, and links them to different digital contents as news, websites, and media for specific preferences and/or audiences. Facebook wraps most of the multimedia up that the users use such as: video, audio, page making, photo uploading, note creations, chats, etc. Also, Facebook allows creating groups divided into many categories: family members, friends, and class groups, groups in which you can sell or buy whatever you want! Facebook offers many games to play, and many of them have become very popular among people like Candy Crush, Plants vs Zombies, Farmville, etc. (newsroom.fb.com, 2015)

A recent survey done by the website statista.com in the first quarter of 2015 showed that Facebook is the most popular social network around the world. This survey also shows that most of the users are young people. Mexico is the fourth country with most Facebook users (top10for.com, 2015), in which a 13-24 year-old band defines who the most active users are by age (AMIPCI, 2014). Therefore, we can figure out what band is more connected every day in Chiapas (if we just take into account the main cities and towns in Chiapas where there is a connection to the Internet).

The UNACH-Tuxtla is a university where many students, from different cities and towns of the state, want to apply for because Tuxtla is the major city where many students once graduated want to get a job. Most of the students have in their “schoolbags” series of previous experiences (Pérez Gomez, 1995) using Facebook. They are part of the statistics shown by the Mexican survey called AMIPCI done in 2014. This survey also expresses that many users connect to the Internet from home (71%), work (46%) and school (34%). We can also consider that many UNACH-Tuxtla students connect to the Internet from school.

I have been working as an English teacher since 2007 at UNACH-Tuxtla. During eight years, I have adapted all of my lessons to the context of the careers’ learners. Before social networks became popular, I required from my Computing Sciences students to do PowerPoint (PP) presentations, and from my Communication students to plan and make a

radio program, sketches or TV ads. All of these activities had the purpose of using and practicing the vocabulary and grammar learned during the lessons adapted to the learners' careers. When social networks became popular in México (noticierostelevisa.esmas.com, 2012), my students preferred to spend most of the times on their opened laptops. I had to adapt my lessons again.

I created a special Facebook account, in which I added all the learners. I divided them into the groups I had been teaching English. They were beginners. In this experience, I tried to adapt the exercises that I did in class. Instead of starting to motivate students to organize their ideas and speak, I uploaded a picture on Facebook as homework. The purpose of uploading a photo is to use the vocabulary and grammar taught in the lessons and I required from the students to describe what they could see in an uploaded image. The idea was to make students recall what they learned in class, organize their ideas, think in English, write with the mistakes they might make. How can the teacher evaluate this activity?

1. If the student wrote good grammar and used the vocabulary taught in the lessons in a correct and fluent form in a "comment", I pushed "Like".
2. If the student wrote sentences and they had few mistakes, I pushed "Like" and sent an "Inbox" to correct the learner's performance.
3. If the student wrote sentences with no sense, I just sent an "Inbox", providing an example to guide the learner.

Students found unusual this activity, but something that was more unusual is the reaction to this homework. First, the students who made few mistakes looked for help with the students who were OK in the exercise. They worked peer-to-peer correction. When they got help from their classmates, they came to me to check if they had well-performed what they had been learned. They told me that they wanted to have a "Like". The students who wrongly performed the written language came to me. They seriously wanted to learn English. When I was on line, the students tried to keep in touch by chatting on Facebook, but they used English! When they were in class, the learners started to ask if they were performing fine or wrong the tasks required during the lessons. Also, the students began to speak English by themselves. All of them wanted a "Like" on Facebook.

Facebook could be a language learning tool, but it is consuming time. I had around 150 students, and I just required this activity on Fridays at midnight as a deadline, and also I just asked this activity to groups with 15-20 learners. Therefore, I spent my time checking my Facebook on Saturday morning. I personally think Facebook could be useful with small groups.

I experienced this activity at the Faculty of Humanidades, and this experience allowed me to notice how the language teachers need to adapt their lessons into the sociocultural learners' contexts. Most of us, as English teachers, give our lessons at the edge of a method, traditional games or activities, and they are not wrong. Every teacher has professional reasons to make them. I think we need to know more about sociocultural learners' contexts since they provide theory, tools or strategies to drive students to better English language learning.

The language learner is inside a global world, and globalization is requiring professional people who speak English and have ICT competences. Finally, a question is emerging from this experience: Are we as English teacher part of the students' real education? Are our lessons adapted to this globalized world?

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