Social Networking Sites as Technology Enhanced Learning Communities towards autonomous language learning

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As the social, political and economic structures of the world become more globally integrated, incorporating international experiences into higher education curricula becomes increasingly more desirable. Moreover, the concept of social computing has revitalised an interest in peer learning and collaboration, notions that have a longer history within the area of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). Globalization and the information-technology revolution demand that students develop not only the intellectual skills but also the communicative skills to integrate in this different societal texture where English as a global language and websites, blogs or social networking sites (SNS), among others are employed by individuals and small groups around the world.

Each of these technological innovations brings with it a need to master not only the technology but the new cultural codes which it engenders. English seems to have joined this list of basic skills and its function and place in the curriculum is not just that of a 'foreign language'. A new model is being generated where English as a foreign language is not longer recognised around the hegemonic power of native English speakers but around a new dynamic model in what Mukherjee (2007:160) refers to "the 'nativization' of English in outer-circle varieties". In this post-modern outlook, then, English is much more widely distributed in what Graddol (2006:84) calls 'the period of Global English'.

Europe is now providing a source of new ideas about how to adapt to this globalised world: free movement of goods and, especially new forms of multilingualism with the influential context of the Council of Europe and its Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001:101 - 108) which gives special attention to second languages learning and the acquisition of communicative language competences. The recent and gradual implementation of the Bologna Process, as an effort to harmonise Europe's higher education in the context of global competition, aims to create a European Area which uses the same unit to measure Higher Education (ECTS credits) with the essential purpose of favouring the mobility and employability of students and graduates. A change on the educational procedures, then, is being applied where quality education based on the continuous assessment, an improvement in the competences acquired by the students is taking place.

The following contribution pretends to cope with the demands of this globalised, post-modern environment through the design and implementation of an online international project where an SNS is used in order to join English as Second Language (ESL) students from different parts of the world. The design of the project appears around the implementation of the Bologna process in the

Faculty of Education from the University of Girona where the basic prerequisite of all students to acquire English at the level B1 of the Common European Portfolio makes English a compulsory competence for communication among its higher education candidates in order to develop in the world. Together with the University of Girona, there is the International Educational and Resources Network (iEARN) which promotes the participation of schools around the world in online international projects.

The project is theoretically grounded around two concepts: Lave and Wenger's (Lave et al., 1991; Wenger, 1998) concept of a community of practice (COP) and Engëstrom's (1987:174) redefinition of Vygotsky's (1978:86) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZOP). Its final aim is the creation of an online learning community where collaborative learning will be promoted through the participation of the students in the project in order to help them not simply to acquire new language forms but to construct themselves as autonomous learners in the second language.

Following the research on the possibilities of technological applications in terms of providing new possibilities for SLA, my intend to design the online project aims to take this research a bit further in order to provide answers to the methodological challenge that these changing and global social interactions provide. This step ahead bases the acquisition of communicative skills in English, not only on a 'non-native-native' pattern, but also on a 'non-native-non-native and/or native' pattern in a more decentralized and globalised environment with speakers of English from all around the world.

These new and global social interactions challenge educators with this opening question that will have to be answered during the implementation of the project: what sort of linguistic skills must participants in this online learning community master for proficient social communication on the net? This first question leads to two different blocks of questions, which refer to needs analysis and teaching methodology. Needs analysis asks: in what ways is social communication on the net different from daily face-to-face social interaction or other online interactions as seen in previous studies? Teaching methodology asks: what sort of educational approach can provide students with the proper skills for proficient social communication on the net?

On the following lines, I will proceed to rationalise how the project has been theoretically designed in order to achieve – as stated in the introduction – the final aim on the design of the project: to foster an online learning community where students could become autonomous English learners through entering the project and participating in the set of activities proposed and to give way to their own choices of creative expansion and development as through their participation. The project contains many of the principles necessary for being considered a learning community based on the characteristics for a COP of shared repertoire, joint enterprise and mutual engagement that I will comment on the following lines.

Wenger (1998:80) considers 'joint enterprise', 'mutual engagement' and 'shared repertoire' as three basic characteristics in order for practice "to generate coherence within a community". Mutual engagement involves regular interaction (Holmes et al., 1999:175) as for example, interactions of English teachers who work together in the elaboration of a project. Joint enterprise is a negotiated enterprise that involves "the complex relationships of mutual accountability that become part of the community" (Wenger, 1998:80); these same teachers working in a project, for example, would be involved in a continuing negotiation of their contributions to the group in order to enlarge the further enterprise. Moreover, their collective and shared interests would result in "a shared repertoire of joint resources for negotiating meaning" (ibid: 85).
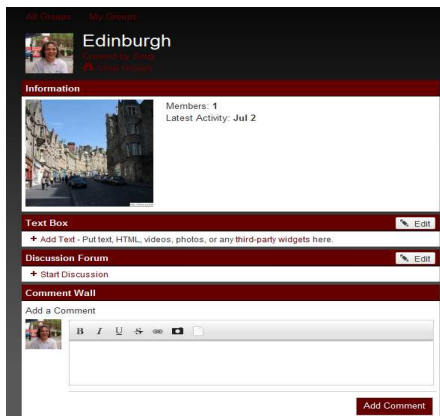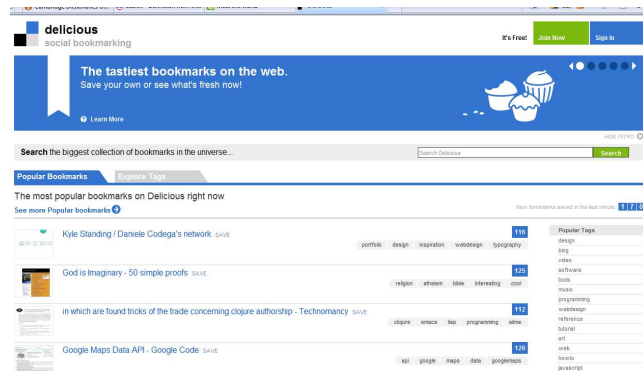
Figure 1

Figure 2

One can find examples of shared repertoire along the project. Some of them are available through the technical characteristics of the platform that integrates all kinds of tools that they can share such as the discussion boards (Figure 1), the chat tools, as well as the possibility of opening sections where they can share videos, pictures, among other possibilities. Other resources appear through the participation in some of the set of activities proposed such as websites that they will share with each other through the use of social bookmarkers (Figure 2).

But this shared repertoire can also be non-physical, such as the methodology they negotiate to accomplish the set of activities or the discourse they use. In this sense, the students are expected to use English as their vehicle for communicating with each other and during their exchanges they are also supposed to bring into action their own procedures to fulfil some of the activities requested. If the students lacked shared repertoire, they would also lack "common points of reference to negotiate the enterprise" (Holmes et al., 1999:176) which is another of the essential characteristic of mutual engagement.

Figure 3

A learning community, then, also evolves around a joint enterprise which allows its members to extend the original created boundaries. In order to achieve this joint enterprise, the design of the project encourages development of multiple viewpoints as most of the activities proposed are opened to many different possibilities and choices; thus, they can choose the city they are interested in (Figure 3) or they can create their city trips (Figure 4) according to their likes and dislikes or their preferences.

All these activities are quite opened to negotiation which is facilitated by all the asynchronous and synchronous communicative tools available. Once the concept of shared repertoire and joint enterprise are contextualized within the project, I will follow with the concept of mutual engagement referred to above. Rogers (2000:386) states that an essential characteristic of mutual

engagement is that "there must be a 'means' for meaningful engagement". This is provided in the design of the project as students are expected to contribute to the main events (Figure 5) as responsible members of their groups, choosing how (asynchronously or synchronously), when and where to communicate with the other groups, for example.

Figure 4

Figure 5

Through this mutual negotiation, the participants are expected to form relationships among them which typically involve regular interactions and which make the COP possible. These interactions can be casual, when exploring the platform or they are wandering in the Coffee Room (Figure 6); they can be intensive, when discussing which questions to write down in the treasure hunt in pairs or small groups. All these interactions generate negotiation of meaning not only among individuals but among the different groups who are exposed to a learning environment with continuously changing input and output conditions "in a time of constant technological innovation" (Wang, 2004:375).

Figure 6

A consequence of this negotiated aspect expected to happen during the different events proposed is that members maintain their identity which is another key concept for the formation of a COP. The project offers meaningful trajectories for their members to break through anonymity and make identities to come to the surface through events such as the individual learners profiles (Figure 7) and the 'map yourself' event where students share their personal information and map themselves in their geographical area.
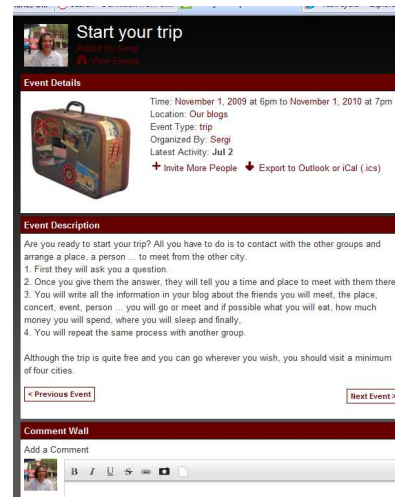
The Coffee Room mentioned above also allows all students to introduce themselves personally and articulate their expectations. Together with the individual identities, the project also offers opportunities for group identity. As Arnold and Putz (2001:189) assert, an online learning environment should support "group awareness and encourage mutual support and engagement". Accordingly, almost all the activities are team-building activities where students are supposed to collaborate with each other in their execution.

The connection between identity formation and L2 acquisition has been documented in many empirical studies (Nguyen, 2005:112). In these studies, researchers show that the experience of learning a new language is also "the experience of identity construction, transformation and negotiation" (ibid). From the perspective of the nature of social identity formation in language learning, then, it is important to emphasize the importance of viewing identity as "dynamically performed" (Butler, 1990 cited in Nguyen, 2005:113) through the learner's participation in a community of practice.

Figure 7

All these multiple identities in the community of learners provide "both complimentary and overlapping competencies to the group" (Rogers, 2000:386) and learners can contribute with new ideas based on their interests or their background. Thus, one of the activities proposed is the creation of a 'treasure hunt' where the students, in groups, can make use of their experience, background or knowledge to provide more information to the group outcome and where each learner can achieve an active and central role.

Figure 8

As Wenger (199) points out, members usually move from 'peripheral participation' to 'full participation'. The project allows for these different degrees of participation and some students may need the help of the teacher or the help of other members of the community which is offered through the instruction forums (Figure 8) or again the Coffee Area, being forced to take a more peripheral participation at the beginning.
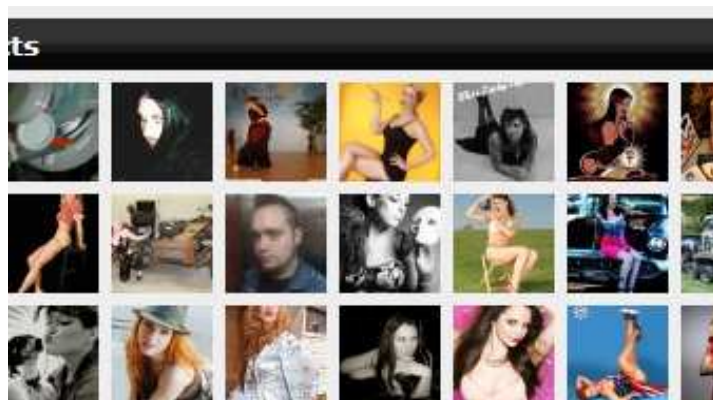

Figure 9

Note: example taken from 'PL addicts' SNS as the platform used for this project has many new members yet.

This participation is necessary for the growth of the learning community and "may lead to new kinds of practice" (Arnold et al., 2001, 185 - 186): a new written product and/or orally transmitted product which are substantially different from the original.

All these 'collectively generated' new products and ideas, spread throughout the world, incorporate Engeström´s idea of 'diffusion of knowledge' (Christiansen et al., 2009:208) as mentioned above which is the result of all these differentiated negotiations that arise between the participants.

This idea of diffusion of knowledge also means the incorporation of new members anytime, anywhere (Figure 9). When these new members enter the community they are requested to join a group and participate in the creation of the treasure hunt (Figure 10), taking a more peripheral position in what Lave and Wenger (1991) revitalised as "apprenticeship learning". If staying in contact with the environment, the participant will gradually become more skilled, socially and linguistically, and gradually closer to the centre of the community creating their own groups, thinking of new itineraries, performing the different events and the most important of all assuming their roles as interdependent autonomous learners.
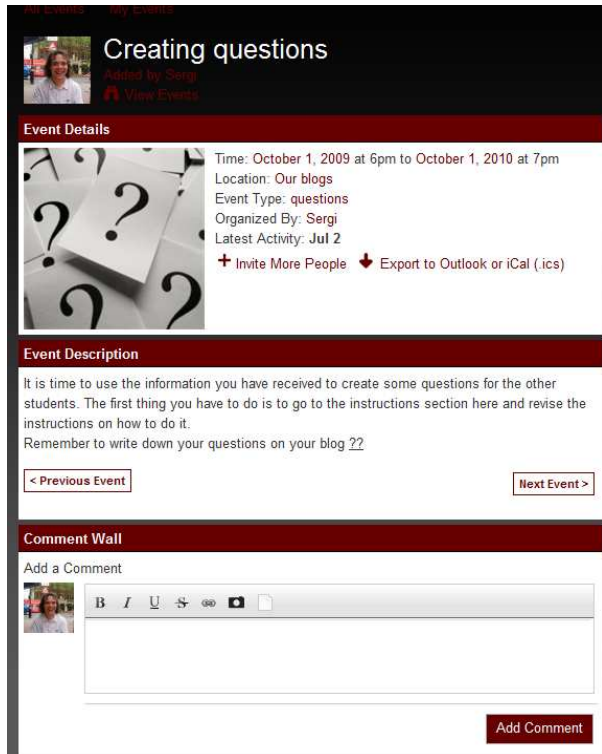

Figure 10

But new membership not only means the incorporation of new students but it also means the extension of the community by inviting external experts to participate as one important design principle of an online learning setting should be "its temporary reaching out to the 'outside world' and connecting to related COPs" (Arnold et al.*,* 2001:185). In this case, in the section 'this week' (Figure 11) a different teacher from a different university is invited to talk about his or her city each week in what has been conceptualised as 'expertise learning' (ibid: 189).
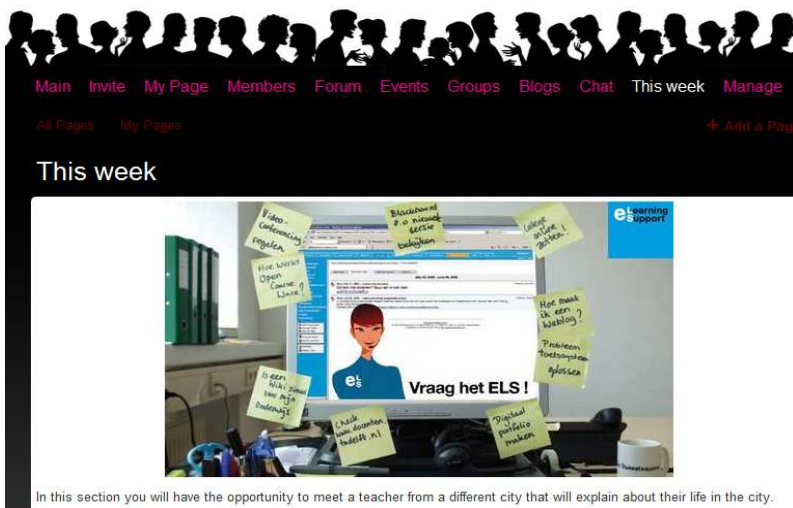

Figure 11

This extension of the ZOP, as redefined by Engeström (1987) as 'learning by expanding', not only takes the form of new outcomes, new groups of students or new expert teachers, but of large-scale online groups. Research on CSCL has usually focused on "small, tightly knit groups" (Christiansen, 2008:208); but the new educational environment in this postmodern view makes it necessary to expand the knowledge of 'cognition' and learning happening to large-scale, loosely tied groups with ill-defined boundaries.

Such larger scale online groups can mirror more deeply the decentralized future of ESL learning that I pretend to draw on the design of this project – a pattern which has become even clearer with

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the recent popularisation of blogs, social networking sites and other Web 2.0 technologies and which resembles processes of 'patchworking' (Ryberg, 2007) or 'braided learning' (Preston, 2007) where multiple resources are repurposed and remixed.

From this postmodernist perspective, the online platform as an L2 classroom, together with the set of activities proposed, are perceived, not as an intermediate space for learning the language before arriving at a target community, but as the space where students "actively perform their social identities and form emergent communities as they learn to use the language" (Lapadat, 2003). It becomes a space of multiple contexts where learners will use the L2 language to communicate not only with native but also with non-native speakers of the language.

Conclusions

As I have mentioned in the previous lines, English has not only become the language of choice for building knowledge and sharing information within as well as across cultures but for communication among non-native speakers (Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000). According to Kalantzis et al. (2000:138), English is found "in different communities, at different levels of the community, in many variants and far removed from the notion of a national language". English is much more widely distributed in this globalised world and recent research estimates that two billion people will start learning English within a decade and that by 2015 three billion people will speak English (Lund, 2006:183). Global communication encourages the development of different social skills and of specific linguistic functions to fulfil them. The teaching of English as a second language has evolved to meet these various communicative needs that have appeared throughout the years.

This permanent adaptation implies both a growing awareness of social changes and the mastering of new technologies for didactic purposes. The 21st century heralds a new change in social behaviour and the transmission of knowledge through the virtual world that computers and the Internet opened up in the late 20th century. Such a radical change means an unlimited range of communicative challenges and needs. One of these is the development of global personal relationships through the Internet. With billions of documents on the web, discussion forums or community-oriented blogs and SNS on the rise English totally dominates the many online contexts that emerge (Econsultancy, 2009).

As learners and teachers populate and traverse this polycontextual space, their practices are transformed and expanded. Increasingly, this polycontextuality is brought into schools as CSCL continues to infuse classroom practices affording new opportunities for communication. The challenge for educators is to provide students of English with the sort of linguistic skills and technical resources that might allow them to access the global communication network successfully. Thus, the design of the project described above constructed around an SNS with a didactical approach focused on social skills can open up a path for new TESOL approaches in the virtual world of the 21st century. Because of its interactional features, the SNS encourages the development of students' language use and language socialization as a learning community through the participation in an online project scheduled around various events in a preparation to travel towards full autonomy. The conclusions can be broadened by engaging with the notion of communicative competence as an effective participation in a particular CSCL environment requires a measure of electronic communicative competence, knowledge of the linguistic system, discourse patterns, and technology and sociocultural rules based on a 21st notion of curriculum where concepts such as collaboration, globalisation and economic growth intertwine.

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