ARC Project Report

Using New Media & Facebook
for cross-cultural interaction in the language classroom

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Abstract

As a teacher interested in new ideas and committed to do my best for my learners, I have been looking for ways to change and improve my classroom work for a long time. I want to make my classroom more attractive, interesting, challenging, creative, less stressful and more fun. Previously, my teaching experience was not based on using *new tools* but rather relied on books in the classroom environment. Having observed my previous teaching practice and experience and analysed previous assignments, *my findings* led to the building up of new approaches to language teaching and learning, introducing new ideas. Thus, a Facebook group named "Action project Ice-Cro2016" was established and its aim was not only cross-cultural interaction, but also a teaching and learning environment with assignments handed in, and thus shared, in a common group . This created a new dimension in the social learning space. It empowered my foreign language class by improving students' language skills, broadening their cultural competences and interests, networking and exchanging information and personal impressions relating to their fields of interest, such as making movies and presenting cultural events, their hobbies, sport achievements on both national and local basis, commenting on the most recent intriguing events and inventions. Both groups of students were supposed to enhance their networking and collaboration skills as well as their technological know-how through cross-cultural interaction. Through social media use, learners enhance their four language skills: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing skills. My learners find using social media to be an interactive, educational and challenging language experience. In this way they benefit from these social media tools. This makes their communication with other people more reliable and much easier. Probably in the upcoming years more people will be learning new languages using social media.

Keywords

Action research, enhancing language teaching, language skills, intercultural learning, social media

Rationale

Young people grow up with new technologies and spend a big portion of their time on social media. Mobile phones, tablets, laptops and computers are gadgets used frequently not only by young people but by everyone. The use of ICT is widespread and popular especially with kids. Whether at school, studying at home, doing a holiday job or having fun on the move, using new media affects kids' everyday lives and has the potential to expand their language knowledge. I wanted to find out more about how students use new media and how I can maximise on this to support their language learning. Here is what one student said when asked, "**How can your language skills be enhanced by using new media and sharing information on Facebook?**"

> *Social media and television definitely have a big impact on language skills, at least in my case. Since I've joined Facebook I always stayed in contact with people that speak English. That has helped me a lot. If there weren't social media and television I wouldn't know English as well.[1]*

What did you want to change and why?

I wanted to move on from older teaching methods and traditional text book-based assignments. Usually, practical activities included exercises chosen to be done in the language class: individually, in pairs, in groups or teams. All tasks were based on criteria from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (**CEFR)** that describes what a learner is supposed to be able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing at different levels. Introducing new and totally unknown set of assignments in the Facebook group helped the students display their language potential and creativity and helped me as a teacher to create new approaches to language teaching. Moreover, the students developed the ability to promote autonomous learning and mastering of language learning processes.

I felt that students' competitive spirit and the constant challenge of assignments led to the development of their higher personal language profile. At the same time, more creative assignments improved standards in language teaching. In classroom practice, the assignment that is sent to the students has a great effect, especially if it is *new*.

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[1] Further examples of learner statements and explanations are provided in an article published in **Scottish Languages Review,Issue35,Winter2018,43-52**: https://ewds2.strath.ac.uk/Library/ScottishLanguagesReview/Issue35-Winter2018/tabid/8325/Default.aspx

What was your research question?

How can students' language skills be enhanced by using new media and sharing information on Facebook in language teaching?

What were your assumptions underlying the question? (Your theoretical assumptions)

At first I was unsure about adding social media to the learning environment because most teaching material was in digital form and each student had to do the assignment on his/her laptop in the class. Some of the assignments were suggested by Icelandic teachers who were also involved in the project. The aim was to analyse the assignments and find themes of students' choice to see if there is anything in their choice that surprised me or my Icelandic colleagues. It was interesting to see if there is a difference in how and what students choose in Iceland and Croatia if Croatian students are more interested in politics, lifestyle, sports than Icelandic students. At the end of the day, the topics dealing with sports prevailed among Croatian students in the group.

Furthermore, a difference in choice of material when they have a free choice, when boys are choosing for girls and vice versa. The boys think the girls are interested in the lives of celebrities, beauty, royal weddings. The girls think the boys are interested in sports, cars, etc.…

Describe the setting

I work at a Vocational School for Construction and Land Surveying (Graditeljsko-geodetska tehnička škola) in Split, Croatia. The school has a long tradition in education. Many respected professionals in the field of architecture, construction and land surveying attended the school, which offers instruction and support in vocational subjects, in *TEFL* courses and in *TESP* courses in English. This is intended to introduce students of English as a foreign language to a number of professional fields they are going to be involved in.

TESP included courses on construction, architecture (classified as structural architecture, interior architecture and environmental architecture), urban planning (or city planning) and land surveying. Future civil engineers, architects and land surveyors are educated at our school. The students are 15 to 18 year olds (B1/B2 level), play active roles in gaining knowledge in vocational fields, as well as in languages. Around 500 students attend the school and 43 teachers work there.

Classroom or group situation(s)

Action project Ice-Cro is a project based on a set of assignments.

Students have a weekly task to find news articles on English or American news websites and share them in the Facebook group, with a status explaining the topic and reasoning their choice. The

Croatian group involves *1 Croatian female and 10 male students* aged 17 and 18, attending upper-secondary-level studies. All participants in this project intend to have intangible objectives such as: increased students' and teachers' motivation, better understanding of different approaches to language education in Croatia and Iceland, gaining knowledge and communication on an international level and improvement of teaching methodology. The students involved volunteer in charities on school and city basis and are willing to do a high level of language performance. They are the ones who also display considerable potential as students of their school, have capacity to interact, establish intercultural relations and collaboratively work with people with varying cultural and language backgrounds.

The next step was getting to know tools. Online teaching tools were introduced to the students in the language classroom and Facebook was not only a place for social interaction, but it was an active learning environment where students found and submitted their assignments.

I was a bit concerned if the students would accept the new teaching/learning environment in the Facebook group. To my surprise, they accepted it and were doing the new assignments given with ease.

Firstly, the students were focused on the learning outcomes of the project activity which include understanding of written and oral language in various types of assignments such as: news articles, oral performance and written texts.

Then, they were taught how to use the most recent technology and social media in order to increase their language profiles. They were made aware of news and social media in the target language and became creators of cross-cultural communication inside the language group.

They became familiar with the teaching materials and aids such as: the Facebook group they were going to work in (Action project Ice-Cro 2016) and assignments created by teachers from Croatia and Iceland.

Describe the action research process

It was observed that learning using ICT helped Croatian students display and increase their language knowledge and high quality of performance with ease and as a teacher I became better equipped to create new approaches to language teaching. I felt improving standards in language teaching and learning either in a theoretical sense or in pedagogical skills. It was found that if students express their issues and needs, a teacher can advance the way of instruction. Constant advancement of teaching/learning environment and developing partnership with students accepting their ideas and suggestions is efficient. Technological advancements support an ELT and learning approach and motivate students' participation.

And last but not least, reflection is an important issue in the process that enables any language educator to learn from their own experiences so that new perspectives can be taken. Enhancing the working perspective, identifying students' learning needs, can lead to the development on a professional and personal level. It should be important for future planning and goal setting. It was observed that the written assignments Croatian students were given enhanced not only their reading and writing skills but also kept gradually improving their language potential in the virtual collaboration space on Facebook. Accordingly, the use of the most recent technology and social media is a great way to facilitate a teaching and learning process. Besides the technology, I also use evaluation questionnaires in which the students involved express their opinions on the activities given.

For example:

- Are the written assignments clearly defined? (yes, no)
- Does the language used help students know what they are expected to perform?
- Can you understand the purpose of the assignments? (What would it be?)
- Can you articulate a particular subject in the assignments?
- Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

100% of the students involved in the project wrote that the written assignments are clearly defined. **89%** stated they use language that helps students know what they are expected to produce, **11**% stated that the written assignments are "more than that". The purpose of the assignments was claimed to be understood by **34%** of the students, **22**% said that they improved their writing and social skills, **11%** said that they helped them better understand the project, **11%** stated they made their speaking and communication better, **11%** stated they expanded their language knowledge. **34%** could articulate a claim about a subject in the assignments and it was sports, weather, news; **33%** of them simply said they can articulate the claim, **11%** could articulate a claim about the subject, **11%** said they could articulate a claim in a lot of them, **11%** stated they could articulate when it came to an assignment on Nikola Tesla. **45%** of students had no suggestions for improvement of the assignments, **22%** claimed the assignments are perfect, **11%** were very satisfied with them, another **11%** claimed they were all right and the rest of **11%** stated they are all well formed.

(Cf. article in Scottish Languages Review, Issue 35, Winter2018, 43-52)

Action research tools used

Observation, reflection, evaluation questionnaires

Main findings

- **What did you find out?**
  I found out that a teacher should always carry on with the further development of assignments.
- **How are your findings linked to the evidence**?
  Constant monitoring of students' activities carried out, led to the evidence.
- **What were the positive outcomes?**
  The assignments made the classroom less stress-released and learning the target language became more fun.

What were the problems and limitations?

Imbalance of students' language potential in the same classroom can sometimes become a big problem because there are always students that need more learning attention.

What did you learn?

Through this project I've learned that each student has her/his own strengths, weaknesses and individual needs that need to be carefully observed. It is important to get everyone involved in the language learning process in order to improve students' close to real life situations skills.

What are your next steps?

Let the students challenge further versions of the assignments to better understand written and spoken language in various types of news articles, promote team spirit, and last but not the least-*personalise a learning approach* respecting individual abilities to make progress faster and easier.

Reference:

https://ewds2.strath.ac.uk/Library/ScottishLanguagesReview/Issue35-Winter2018/tabid/8325/Default.aspx