Teaching English language learners skills for virtual communication

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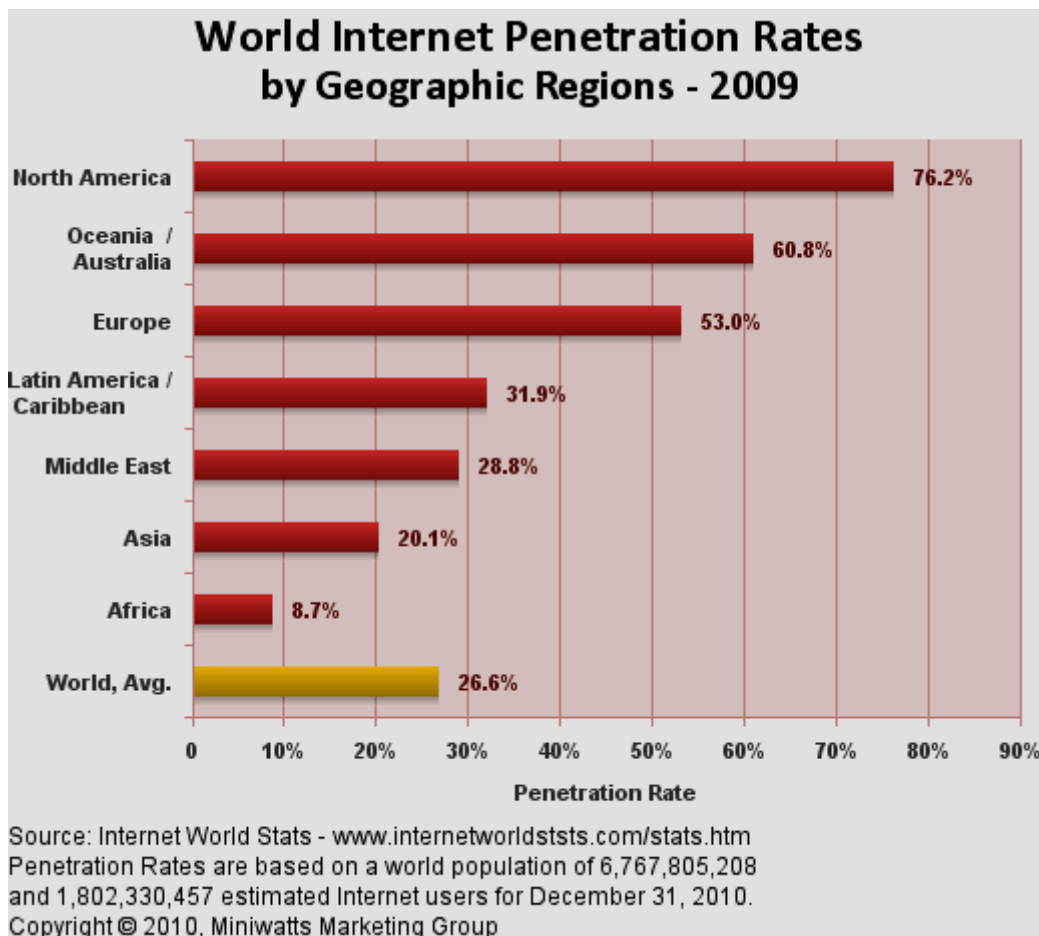caro_moore@yahoo.com

Resumen

El fenómeno de la comunicación virtual por medio de las redes sociales está creciendo hoy en día de una manera exponencial. En muchos casos, se puede caracterizar esta interacción como una conversación global, y en la cual se usa el idioma inglés como una lingua franca. Mientras el uso de los TICs es cada vez más común en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera y se empieza a ver más y más actividades usando herramientas como facebook, los wikis y los 'apps', hay una carencia de información para maestros acerca de cuales son las normas de interacción y las características de los textos que se están generando en estos medios de comunicación. ¿Cómo debe uno comunicarse en redes sociales globales virtuales de una manera apropiada e efectiva? Por lo tanto, es importante que en la enseñanza del inglés como idioma extranjera también abarque las habilidades lingüísticas y socio-culturales necesarias para participar en interacciones virtuales de esta naturaleza. Este artículo identifica las características discursivas de este tipo de interacción y comparte técnicas para su enseñanza.

Palabras claves: Redes sociales globales, características discursivas, enseñanza del inglés

Introducción

The phenomenon of virtual communication is rapidly expanding around the globe with the ever-increasing access to social networks via both computer and phone connections. An analysis of the extent of internet access in the first decade of this century paints a global picture of connectivity for over a quarter of the world's population (Miniwatts Marketing group, 2010) and the trend is estimated to grow steadily.

World Internet Penetration Rates by Geographic Regions - 2009

Region	Penetration Rate
North America	76.2%
Oceania / Australia	60.8%
Europe	53.0%
Latin America / Caribbean	31.9%
Middle East	28.8%
Asia	20.1%
Africa	8.7%
World, Avg.	26.6%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldststs.com/stats.htm
Penetration Rates are based on a world population of 6,767,805,208
and 1,802,330,457 estimated Internet users for December 31, 2010.
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Current statistics here in Mexico show a yearly growth rate for internet access of approximately 14% (2010 – 2011) and that household internet connections are increasingly via cellular phone (AMIPCI, 2012). Numbers in accessibility to the world wide web will further increase with the Ministry of education's (SEP) commitment to ensuring access to pupils in all of its schools across the country.

The panorama is equally encouraging in other developed and developing nations and 'keyboard communication' is rapidly establishing itself as the norm among young citizens around the world.

However, despite the inherent globalilty of online communication (in theory it is accessible to people anywhere in the world), in reality much online social networking takes place within relatively closed communities (where 'friending' is required) or in networks aimed at particular national communities, and where the language of interaction is the dominant language of its members. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. Alongside these more closed networks for social interaction there is an increasing number of more global conversations taking place, where communities form based on topics of common interest, be it in entertainment, culture, health and living, the ecology or politics. The language of communication for these global conversations is usually English, which functions as a lingua franca for the majority of the participants who will come from different language backgrounds. It is this phenomenon of global conversation, where English is the lingua franca, that forms the focus of this paper.

In my work with students studying a BA in Multimedia, at the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, it has become apparent that these students struggle to integrate in global social networks and tend to remain on the periphery, as 'outsiders', of these global conversations. The interest of these Multimedia students lies, for the most part, in the area of online gaming, where participants enter the global gaming arena under a particular identity or *persona*, compete in games, and then spend short periods of time commenting on the experience. Focus group interviews with my students point to two main stumbling blocks in this process: awareness of the social skills and awareness of the discursive features typical of this genre of network communication.

This paper, then, will discuss ways in which the classroom teacher of English can support English as foreign language (EFL) learners with strategies for joining in global conversations and with discursive and lexical skills for text comprehension and appropriate text production.

Background

In Mexico, as with many developing countries around the world, the population of internet users is indexed to level of education and age bracket, with children/adolescents representing the fastest growing social sector. The use of internet for social networking is one area that is growing exponentially (9 out of 10 internet users access social networks – AMIPCI, 2012) and for young adults in a university setting being able to use the internet effectively for this purpose is an important personal goal. Since English continues to be the dominant language of the net, learners turn to the English classroom for support in both understanding the texts they want to read and in participating in the social networks which hold appeal for them.

However, while linguistic analysis exists on the nature of texts used in online communication (for example, Thurlow, 2003; Crystal, 2001; Kern *et al,* 2008; Paolillo, 2001) it seems that textbooks for learning English have yet to incorporate this area in their syllabi and the teacher of EFL is without the tools to support learners in acquiring necessary skills in what is commonly referred to as 'netspeak'. It is necessary, then, for the language teacher to find his or her own way around introducing the social skills and the discursive features which will facilitate online communication.

A perusal of the literature on the phenomenon of 'netspeak' throws light on the characteristics of this communication genre and a linguistic analysis of the function, content and discursive features of virtual communication points to two key social skills and three defining discursive features in netspeak : impression management and

friendship performance; abbreviated text length, reduction in text structure, and lexical abbreviations / blends. I go on to elaborate on each of these features in turn.

Online social skills

Thurlow (2003) has identified in his studies of the ways in which new internet generations are communicating some of the key skills for social interaction and looks at how these skills have been transferred to online interaction. The two skills which play most prominence in terms of the social networking between relative strangers are impression management and friendship performance (Paolillo,2001). Both these skills are used by most of us almost automatically in our face-to-face dealings with other people in social situations; what is pertinent in this paper is the way these skills are transferred onto online interaction and the ways they manifest themselves in the medium of virtual communication.

'Impression management' concerns the way individuals manage that all-important 'first impression' and then how they maintain or transform their identity over time. In face-to-face communication we consciously or unconsciously project a particular identity through our choice of clothing, our body language and our speech habits; in online communication we are mostly devoid of these aspects of our identity. Instead, we offer clues to who we are through our choice of avatar (i.e. graphic representation of ourselves) and the nickname we communicate under, as well as the texts we produce.

However, whilst in face-to-face interaction we modify our dress code, our code of conduct and our speech codes according to the context or situation of interaction, more often than not our avatar and nicknames remain static and we may use the same 'identity' for different contexts of online communication. An example of this tendency towards ignoring the importance of managing our identity according to the context of interaction was brought roughly home to one of my students ('Ángel'), whose email account used the name 'sexbabe92@....'. When he inquired why he had been rejected for a job he had

applied for he was informed that the interview committee considered he 'lacked the maturity for a position in their company'. On filling out his application form it had not crossed his mind that his email address represented a particular facet of his identity and that just as he had paid attention to the clothes that he chose for the interview, he needed to pay attention to the message that his email account projected and more carefully manage his identity.

Another important aspect of identity-projection is our choice of speech codes. In face-to-face interaction we often unconsciously modify the way we express ourselves (language structure, lexical choice, tone, register and accent) according to the communicative situation we find ourselves in and the way we want to come across. In the job interview I mention above, Ángel would have used a more formal register, avoiding the use of inappropriate colloquial expressions or slang; in other words, his more 'careful' use of language would help him to project an image of seriousness, responsibility and maturity appropriate to the job he was applying for.

Amongst his friends, however, it would be expected that he would choose a more informal speech code which would help him to identify himself as 'one of them'. Matters are more complicated, however, in an online environment since not only is Angel using a language that is not his own (English) as his medium of communication, he is also using a particular language code (often referred to as 'netspeak' or sometimes as 'textese') as a written form to represent spoken text. 'Chats' or 'messaging' have their very own discursive formats and being able to use these norms is just one more way of projecting an identity image of yourself as an 'insider'.

Inextricably linked to this skill of identity and impression management is a second social skill of 'friendship performance' (Thurlow, 2003). As its name suggests, friendship performance concerns the actions we take to maintain and nourish our relationships with others and in the case of virtual interaction, refers to the strategies we use to become an

accepted member of an online community. Part of this lies in our ability to project an image of ourselves which indicates an affinity with other members of the group; to do this we need to identify the kinds of characteristics group members have in common. But perhaps the most powerful strategy we have at our disposal lies in the nature of the texts we write. For instance, while in face-to-face interaction body language (smiling, eye-contact, posture etc.) plays a supremely important role in 'friend-making' or becoming a member of a social group, in virtual communication we need to resort to other tools.

Keyboard features such as emoticons and type face can help us express a friendly and a relaxed attitude, which will help to establish and nurture online friendships. In addition, the ways in which we construct our texts can also help to establish us as an 'insider' and contribute to our possibilities of establishing and maintaining satisfying online social relationships.

For example, typically online texts are brief and abbreviated; they contain very specific sets of lexical items, some of which are specific to the online community in question and others of which are more general; and often texts are truncated and then added to (or comments expanded on) once a reply or acknowledgement has been made by the virtual interlocutor. (This seems to be the online equivalent of waiting for your listener to nod his head to indicate he is following what you are saying, before going on with what you want to say). Helping students to notice these features in the texts of established members of the social network they are wishing to join, and then having them mirror these textual features in their own contributions to the interaction is an effective way of helping them to learn 'friendship performance'.

Having identified the two defining social skills for effective online interaction, I go on now to explore in more depth the discursive features of typical online texts.

The discursive features of online texts

In this section I would like to look at the ways online texts differ from offline texts. To begin with, it is important to realize that what drives these differences is the nature of the interaction in itself. Offline texts can be conceptualized as 'written texts' which have been drafted with some care and thought and with a particular purpose and a particular audience in mind. Essentially they are asynchronous and embody a delay in time between the writing of the text and the reading of the text. Online texts, on the other hand, are synchronous and are produced in ´real-time´ as an immediate response to a particular communicative event. Almost no re-writing or careful editing occurs in the production of online texts and in this sense they are more akin to spoken texts. Whilst offline texts can benefit from processes of reflection and editing, online communication requires interaction to be 'instant'; this call for speed results, in turn, in texts which are, in all their aspects, 'brief'.

This overriding feature of 'brevity' applies to three aspects of online text. Firstly, it applies to the overall length (and detail) of the text; information tends to be conceptualized in capsule form and what we send out through our texts is one capsule at a time. Secondly, it applies to the structure of the text. Both the organization of the information and its layout is vastly reduced; there is neither time nor space for developing a standard three-part structured text which includes an introduction, the body, and a conclusion. And thirdly, the feature of brevity applies to the lexicon, where words are abbreviated by shortening them (e.g. 'mo' for 'moment'), by clipping them (e.g. 'tonigh' for 'tonight'), by contracting them (e.g. 'nxt' for 'next'), by initializing them (e.g. 'LOL' for 'laugh out loud'), or by substituting them with a homophone (e.g. '2day' for 'today'). An awareness of these 3 features of brevity in online texts can be extremely beneficial for participants who are still finding their way into a virtual social network since it gives them the tools to start 'talking

the talk' and it allows them to appear as being an inside member of the online community.

In the following section I share some examples from the classroom which aim to support learners in their development of social skills for online communication and help them to build an awareness of the appropriate structural and lexical features of online texts.

Teaching techniques for online social networking

My experience with teaching English to Mexican undergraduates suggests that an effective approach to teaching skills and language for online social networking incorporates 'noticing' or 'consiousness-raising' activities. Through these activities, learners are guided in their noticing of key aspects of effective online interaction and they are then given the opportunity to practice these skills and reflect on their effectiveness as ´lurkers´ in an online social network. In this respect, I am borrowing for my teaching a principled framework that was initially developed for the teaching and learning of digital and media literacy (Renee Hobbs, 2010) and which combines 5 key interrelating competencies which function as a cyclical system.

Although the focus applied to each of the 5 competencies in the original model (as discussed by Hobbs, 2010) is on the appropriacy of the content of digital media, and as such is not directly applicable to the aims of the language class which looks for ways top help learners participate in online networks in a lingua franca (English), what is useful about this model is that it conceptualizes the acquisition of digital literacy as an ongoing, organic cycle of *noticing*, *acting*, and *reflecting*. In this sense it captures for the teacher of 'netspeak' the essentiality of working from the bottom-up and taking as your starting point what people are actually doing in social networks; and secondly, it captures the all-important point that the norms for online interaction are in constant change, and hence need to be periodically re-assessed.

To initiate awareness of the role identity plays in online interaction between strangers and of the importance of establishing 'the right' identity to ensure more fluid inter-group relations we begin the class with some reflection on the use of avatars (graphical images individuals use to identify themselves).

Activity 1: *A picture speaks a thousand words.*

Step 1: The learners are asked to bring a printed copy of their avatar to the class. The teacher distributes the avatars randomly around the class and tells the learners to note down what kinds of clues the graphical image, together with the user-name, give about the personality of the owner of this avatar. The learners then try to identify which avatar belongs to which member of the class.

Step 2: The teacher forms small groups and the learners from one group exchange their avatars with the learners of another group. Each group then discusses the kinds of identities projected through these avatars and they decide if the identity-type helps or hinders membership of the online groups previously identified by the class as ones they wish to participate more fully in. (In the case of my learners, the common denominator here was 'gaming groups'). Learners are asked to provide written feedback under each avatar and then return the avatar with its feedback to its owner. Some time if given for individuals to ask for clarification should there be a need.

Step 3: Learners visit one or two gaming sites and, in pairs, study the avatars and user-names of the most popular members of the site. Have them note down what kinds of messages these avatars / user-names send out about the people they represent. Then have learners make any changes to their own avatar and user-name should they see fit. (Step 3 can be done as homework if you have no access to internet in your classroom).

Step 4: Invite learners to try out their new avatars in the online sites they like to frequent, and then report back to the class if they noticed any difference in the ways other members of the site responded to them.

A second classroom activity which helps raise learners´ awareness of the nature of online social skills involves 'lurking' on the social networks the learners aspire to participating in. Visiting these sites as an observer and watching how the interaction unravels (without participating themselves), can give learners important insights into the ways fully-accepted members of the online community communicate.

Activity 2: ***A fly on the wall.***

Step 1: Before class, have the learners enter an online site they wish to participate in and observe the interaction between the members. Give them the following questions for them to reflect on as they observe: *How do the participants show friendliness to each other? Do they:*

a)   *Use emoticons?*

b)   *Use each other´s names?*

c)   *Use certain 'in-group' words or expressions?*

d)   *Use other strategies?Which?_____ _____*

Have the learners copy and paste sections from the online conversation onto a word document to illustrate the strategies for 'being friendly' that they noticed in the interactions they observed.

Step 2: In the classroom, organize the learners into groups and have them share the extracts of online conversations they selected from their preferred social network. Ask them to prepare a 3 minute presentation for the whole class on what they noticed about ways people show friendliness in online interaction. When they are ready, have the learners give their presentations.

Step 3: Draw together the key points made in each presentation in the form of a summary on the board. For homework invite the learners to go back to their social networks and to try out these techniques for 'being friendly'. Invite them to share their experiences in the following class.

It is very likely that in this activity your learners will have identified that one of the ways online conversants show friendliness is through mirroring the discourse (or type of language) used by co-conversants. This can be the springboard for the following classroom activity, which turns the learners´attention to the discursive features typical of online interaction.

Activity 3: *Cn u net spk?*

Step 1: Write the title of the activity on the board (*Cn u netspk?)* and ask the learners what it means. Have the learners share their own examples of 'netspeak' or ´textese´.

Step 2: Distribute the following chart which shows the different ways online users modify standard lexis to turn it into textese and thereby increase their speed in writing:

Shortenings	Contractions	Clippings	Initialisms	Homophones
mo	Nxt	bout	LOL	Gr8
def	Jokn	I´l	GG	cya
tog	Wk	tonigh	brb	every1

Explain that there are 5 ways we can go about abbreviating the words or expressions we use in our online conversations and go through each group, having the learners identify the meaning of each item.

Step 3: Have learners work in groups to add their own examples of textese to the chart. Encourage them to identify examples from the conversations they copied for Activity 2, above. When they are ready, invite representatives from each group to put their examples on the board.

Step 4: Distribute slips of paper to each group and give them 60 seconds to compose a short message for another team, using textese. Have each group pass on their message and then give them another 60 seconds to write a response.

Step 5: For homework have them visit the social networks of their choice and identifying the most frequently used instances of textese used on that site.

Being fluent in the most common lexical abbreviations used for online interaction is an important step towards increasing both speed of communication and a sense of belongingness to the social network in question; being able to speak the same 'dialect' helps create a sense of common identity and forge virtual relationships of liking and trust. However, there is one further skill that a fluent user of netspeak needs to master, and that

is the skill of making his or her texts 'look' right. The following activity helps learners in building an awareness of other appropriate features of an online text: structure, punctuation and format.

Activity 4: ***Compare and contrast.***

Step 1: Choose a text from a blog site that is of interest to your students and then re-write the text in its full, standard form. Project this second version of the text, in its standard format, and read it with your learners. For example:

Hello everyone,

   Well I think 'Shaved Bieber' sucks! Justin Bieber is all over the internet because we love him. In my opinion, people like Greg Leuch should use their talents blocking harmful stuff like pornography. Leave Justin alone.

   I love you Justin; I think you are the greatest!

Best,

   Lupita.

Step 2: Then ask your learners "How can we turn this standard text into an appropriate online text?". Work on the task together as a whole class using the following reflection questions to guide you:

a)   Consider the format.

* How many sections does the text have?

   * Which sections would you leave?

b)   Reduce the words. (HINT: A style which is more direct helps to shorten texts).

* How can you make the message shorter and more direct? What would you take out?

* What would you add (emoticons etc)?

   * What other features of netspeak could you use?

For example:

~~Hello everyone,~~

~~Well I think~~ Shaved Bieber sucks SUCKS!!! ~~Justin~~ ~~Beiber~~ is all over the internet because ~~coz~~ we love him´m. ~~In my opinion,~~ people like Greg Leuch should use their talents blocking harmful stuff like porno~~graphy~~. ~~Leave Justin Beiber alone~~ LEAVE JB ALONE!!! I love you Justin I.L.Y. JB; ~~I think~~ you are the greatest UR the G8est!

~~Best, Lupita~~.

Step 3: Now have the learners write their own paragraph in standard English on a topic of interest for them. Have them exchange their paragraphs with a partner, and then adapt their partner´s paragraph to an appropriate online format. Monitor the learners as they work and provide them with the support they need.

Step 4: For homework invite the learners to practice posting appropriate messages on an online social network of their choice. Have them share their experiences in the following class.

Through this kind of translation activity, learners begin to notice the ways texts are structured and how punctuation, keyboard symbols and case are used in specific ways to communicate specific meanings. They quickly become aware of the need to reduce texts from their full form and become increasingly faster in producing online texts. As their speed and fluency develop, they will soon find themselves able to hold their own in online conversations.

Conclusión

In this article I have argued for a structured approach to the teaching of discursive skills for participation in online social networks. It should be the aim of the language teacher to enable learners to monitor how language is used in technology and to evolve alongside these linguistic changes in their own skills as online users. Using a framework for digital literacy which encourages learners to move through several supporting and interrelated stages as they explore the ways language is used with technology is a significant step forward towards a principled approach to the teaching of online language use. The use of 'noticing' or 'consciousness-raising' activities in the classroom can be an effective way to nudge learners towards developing their own critical eye and can help them get a firm foothold in the first of many cycles of this framework for digital literacy. Indeed, a little guided input in the classroom on the nature of netspeak can go a long way since learners habitually spend inordinate lengths of time on social networks – a key factor in ensuring rapid acquisition in the skills for online social communication.

Finally, the way the land lies today in terms of the dominance of information technologies and the growing tendencies towards world-wide virtual communication is a clear cry for the need for English language practitioners to address the skills for technology-mediated communication in their classrooms in order to enable their learners to participate more fully in global conversation.

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