

YOUTUBE FOR LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: CRITICAL THINKING, COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS

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Abstract

The selection of available videos on *YouTube* comes up as a meaningful way to foreign language learning. The approach has been adopted in a high school, engaging 11th grade students (16/17 years old) in formal and non-formal learning environments. *Our World; Teen Consumers; The World of Work and the Multicultural World* were the curriculum themes covered by the current experience.

The first author, an English teacher, is doing her master's dissertation based on a case study [1] [2], which focuses on the impact of *YouTube* on promoting essential competences to the English language learning process. A formal research dimension is now added to this framework based on the teacher's own practices until the moment.

In this paper we present; a) theories that support the integration of *YouTube* for learning English as a second language; b) approaches and specific materials centred on the students and used in the classroom context, illustrating some examples; c) the study design and the techniques to collect and analyse data; d) the value added by the component of investigation to school teaching practice.

Keywords - Language learning, high school, *YouTube*, *cognitive skills*

1 INTRODUCTION

The current trend towards the use of technologies for learning focuses on the web 2.0 associated applications, which encourage young students to social interaction, as well as to creating and sharing information. Actually, the profusion and easy access to tools and channels for video production and sharing, such as *YouTube*, emerge as an example of such applications.

However, bearing in mind that these resources meet no safety standards, their use in the classroom seems inappropriate. It is also known that the general trend among students is to consume online contents passively. Taking this into account, teachers may turn to video technology to develop students' reflective and critical thinking [3], helping them develop criteria for selecting the information sources available on the web. Furthermore, the use of authentic learning materials that engage second language learners to communicate in real contexts and foster the development of comprehension and communication (oral and writing) skills and intercultural communication competences, plays a crucial role in foreign language learning [4] [5].

The selection of available videos on *YouTube* comes up as a meaningful way to foreign language learning. Such an approach has been adopted in a high school, integrating both formal and non-formal learning environments. It has involved 11th grade students (15/16 years old), studying themes in specific domains: *our world; teen consumers; the world of work; the multicultural world*.

Both general competences - consisting in particular of their knowledge (*savoir*), skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*), existential competence (*savoir-être*) and ability to learn (*savoir apprendre*) - and specific ones (linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences) interacting in the acquisition of communicative language competences can be dynamically augmented if teachers and students learn how to take advantage of the potential uses of YouTube videos.

Philosophical foundations supporting the incorporation of YouTube for ESL (English as a second language) learning, avenues and goal-oriented materials are next presented.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Information and Communication Technologies are currently seen as one of the main means for lifelong learning [6] supporting the attainment of key competences; the digital competence, understood as the confident and critical use of electronic media for work, leisure, learning and communication [7] and competences related to reading, writing, logical and critical thinking and ability to handle with information and communication in an ethically and socially responsible European citizenship. Competence in foreign languages is as well essential to the development of an intervening and responsible European citizenship being the promotion of the English language included in the Portuguese Technological Plan, within the Lisbon Strategy initiatives [8].

Nevertheless, although the technological landscape is dense [9], youngsters' technological skills and know-how are far from being acknowledged and integrated either by school or parents [10]. Seldom is their use well-informed and safe, not to mention their articulation with school learning and use in the classroom, being Portugal far below the European average as far as Information and Communication Technologies (TIC) integration in schools are concerned [11].

Currently, in order to engage with *Generation Y students*, some teachers are setting out on Web 2.0 applications. *Digital natives* [12] demand for new learning environments responding to their needs. The embracement of Google different applications allows youth more freedom, power and will to participate and change information, making them more active, participant and dynamic.

A clear example might be the profusion and easy access to tools and channels for video production and sharing such as YouTube: "Le web 2.0 donne aux gens la possibilité de trouver, organiser, partager et créer de l'information d'une manière à la fois personnelle et globalement accessible" [13]. In a world of constant change and hyper-connectivity, perspectives regarding this medium are changing. *Its* increasing numbers and quality concur to the redefinition of *its* capabilities and use.

Taking this into account, teachers may turn to video technology to teach learners how to locate significant information, judge the reliability of sources, solve problems and think critically [3]. On the other hand, it's worth noticing that the use of authentic learning materials stimulates second language learners to communicate in real contexts and fosters the development of communicative language competences. These competences - activated in the performance of language activities involving reception (listening/reading) and production (speaking/writing) – comprise linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences [14]. Further still, recalling the theory of multiple intelligences [15] and learners' cognitive heterogeneity, these tools might foster the individual potential of each learner, developing not only linguistic competences but also other dimensions.

In this context, new web 2.0 technologies as *YouTube* come up as a challenging support to language learning. The effective integration of this pedagogic resource in the learning environment resides in the way it is used in teaching and learning and in its combination with other alternative materials.

Actually, according to Kornhaber (2001, quoted by Smith, 2002, 2008) "Students must have extended opportunities to work on a topic". Full aware that it should serve the curriculum and accomplishment of clearly planned objectives, a properly selected and well-run video clip, may work as a catalyst and facilitator for the usage of language, becoming a forceful and motivational tool". [16]

Additionally, the online platform *Moodle* works as a complement to *YouTube* in a *b-learning* perspective [17]. The asynchronous participation in online forums and the posting and exchange of contents allows the sharing and strengthening of knowledge as emphasised by Miranda, Morais, Dias, & Almeida [18]¹ " besides fostering individual learning, collective learning is also encouraged in these

¹ Translation of the original into the English language is our responsibility.

communities through interaction, sharing and collaboration of every member. Interaction between members of a community may contribute to give a meaning to individual and collective efforts put into learning”.

3 PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 Context

The approach has been adopted in a secondary school in Portugal. It involved 11th grade students (16/17 years old), within an ESL (English as a second language) learning environment.

Firstly, it is important to make clear that the selection of the specific domains to be studied (in this case, the 11th grade) comprehending the themes *Our World*, *Teen Consumers*, *The World of Work* and *The Multicultural World* are beyond the scope of teachers. Bearing in mind the National Curriculum, ESL teachers design the school year planning accordingly. Approaches to teaching may differ however.

School's conditions are another drawback teachers are faced with; there are no beamers or computers in the classrooms. These have to be reserved in advance and sometimes they don't work at all. Teachers have to carry their own computers and sometimes activities are postponed for lack of conditions (too much light and no black curtains in the classroom as another example). Additionally, some eleventh-grade students are below the expected average as they present some handicaps concerning the usage of the language (ESL). Further still, *YouTube* video clips abound but either they meet no safety standards or they do not fit the specific domains, making the selection of the appropriate ones a difficult task.

3.2 Activities

The practice emerged as an exploratory experience. Students were familiar with film and documentary viewing and showed great enthusiasm about this language learning-oriented approach that was meeting their real interests and expectations. On the other hand, the teacher was incorporating authentic materials as a support to the learning process, fitting within the specific domains of ESL. However, acknowledging the films lengthy, the need for change urged. Step by step, *YouTube* was integrated as a result of the first experience, keeping the pace and enjoyable spirit of experimentation.

The potential of *YouTube* as an effective pedagogic resource lies in the way it is used rather than in itself as a technological tool. Accordingly, to achieve learning goals, the first step is to clarify the learning intent always considering the characteristics and context of learners. Teachers have to think in advance what are students required to learn and produce at the end of the lesson so that they can select the appropriate video.

Video support materials are formerly designed by teachers taking into account producers' information (Free Range Studios, for example) or feedback given by students on previous teaching materials. Students are at times invited to help the teacher build materials. Each video is carefully previewed not only to find out its appropriateness for the lesson's goals and learners' outcomes but also to prepare the lesson itself and create the most suitable worksheets, which are handed out in a printed version. Some of the successful selected videos concerning the topic *Our world were The Story of Stuff* (available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-915355019665665673>) and *Grocery Store Wars* (available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVrlyEu6h_E) produced by Free Range Studios as well as the video clip *Earth Song* by Michael Jackson (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4Hcd60VoRM>).

Toby Slater's *Consumption* (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YioR2ULrrQ>) regarding the topic *Teen Consumers* had also a significant impact on learners.

Video viewing and learning isn't passive. The provided worksheets imply active viewing. Activities are done before watching, while watching and after watching. In fact, some activities are done prior to viewing in order to integrate the video: prediction questions, vocabulary exercises, reviews or film biography reading; sometimes students are asked to do a previous homework, as reading or looking some words up in the dictionary. While watching the clips, learners carry out widely varied activities: taking notes, filling blanks, True/False exercises, correcting mistakes. After the film screening, discussion guides are provided in order to work in groups or individually. Learners answer a set of

questions, some of them complex questions, going beyond the text, debate and write the answers and sometimes write a review. They are given space to think for themselves and come up with their own opinions and solutions. Class discussions are usually very lively at the end of the activities. Students with speaking handicaps try to convey the message in English, as it would be expected.

It is to underline that sometimes videos have to be reviewed, once or twice, depending on learners' skills. At the end of the class (sometimes it takes two classes of ninety minutes each), students write a classroom journal, giving their opinion on the video effects, making reference to advantages and disadvantages of the materials, assessing the pedagogical approach, adding comments, stating their misunderstandings ...

Aside from these activities, learners expand and share their learning doing subsequent activities, either discussing the theme on online forums or contributing with their own reviews posted on the teacher and classroom's space on the online platform *Moodle*.

3.3 Results

Firm conclusions can't be drawn since we are reporting to an exploratory practice.

Nevertheless, some facts are deserving of consideration. As a matter of fact, at a certain point of the learning process, the teacher was amazed to see how students were captivated by the potentialities of this popular and familiar medium. The use of video, comprising sound, graphics and animation, seemed to display some advantages over textbooks, worksheets, slides, overhead projectors and films; learners started to select videos available on *YouTube* with a critical eye and ask the teacher to incorporate them in classes, realising that "their" tool effectively used in the classroom could help them achieve learning outcomes. The video-enhanced classes were engaging students in the learning process, restoring the confidence of those dealing with language problems and encouraging them to participate in classes; some students seemed prone to assimilate vocabulary, discuss the subjects and give distinct viewpoints. Students were better informed, ideas were clearer and the contents introduced seemed more meaningful.

As a next step, learners will be provided new opportunities to improve the learning experience. Producing their own videos may be one of the challenging activities already in mind.

Full aware that we are embarking on an exciting experience, many questions begin to form in our mind: Will this practice improve ESL learning? Will it develop their reflective and critical thinking? Can these tools help teachers unlearn old ways of teaching? Can they promote a new effective model of teaching and learning? Can videos be transformed into a more collaborative tool?

4 FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The video-enhanced curriculum exploratory practice represents the first step of a larger qualitative research project integrated into a Master's dissertation. A new research dimension will be now added to the practical experience carried out throughout this school year. Bearing in mind its distinguishing features, a case study seems the most suitable. The focus will not be on generalization but on understanding the particulars of the case in its complexity.

National Language Syllabuses strongly advise teachers to take active and resourceful methodologies and use Information and Communication Technologies. Likewise, some flexibility is allowed to teachers within the framework of the existing curriculum, being up to them to put technologies to good use. The research to be conducted seems to be appropriate to the context, taking into account the students' characteristics, their levels of language knowledge, their motivations and interests and further still the socio-cultural component of the National Syllabus for 10th grade students (15/16 years old), covering themes such as *The Teens' World, A World of Many Languages, A World of Communication and The Technological World*.

In accordance with the above mentioned, eight classes (90 minutes each) will take place next school year. Lesson planning and goal-oriented worksheets will provide the basis for classes activities. The asynchronous non-formal learning environment on the computer platform will complement class activities providing an extra means to cooperation, interaction and sharing. Learners are expected to answer a question on the video clip or comment on a quotation on online forums. Similarly, they will be

contributing to the learning activity when posting and exchanging their own video reviews and other assignments on the platform.

It is expected that the active involvement in the whole process will lead students to become producers rather than consumers of Web 2.0 technologies. Learners will create their own videos, going beyond information and knowledge conveyed. Multiple intelligences and media literacy skills, so important in the digital age, are likely to be developed as well when authoring their short videos.

Recalling that learning will take place in a formal and non-formal curriculum environments, offline and online, qualitative data for analysis will be collected both in classes and the online platform. Bearing in mind that the researcher is also the English teacher, participant observation will also provide factual information to be gathered as field notes. At the end of each activity, students will take a few minutes to give written responses to one or two open questions to be registered in a kind of classroom journal and to respond to *natural field interviews* (Fontana & Frey, quoted by Bowler, 1997) [19]. Lastly, semi-structured interviews will provide answers and insights on specific issues.

Final analysis of findings, focused on content analysis, will be conducted keeping in mind the predefined categories covering communicative language competences as well as invaluable cognitive skills such as reflective and critical thinking. Other possible categories emerging along the research will be taken into consideration as well.

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