International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

Social Media’s Learning Outcomes within Writing instruction in the EFL Classroom: Exploring, Implementing and Analyzing Storify

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Abstract

Research has frequently demonstrated the positive impact of Web 2.0 tools on writing education in foreign-language classrooms. However there is limited research on the use of social media (e.g. Facebook) in teaching practices in general, and writing instruction in second-language teaching in particular. This paper presents an experiment to examine the effectiveness of social media on writing activities within the EFL classroom. We focused on Storify, which stands out amongst social media, as it collects content from existing multiple social networks, and creates the possibility to write your own memorable story by adding text. Furthermore, it is a community of practice with authentic learning material. A specific lesson (2 x 50 min) was designed which benefited from the social media potential of Storify. The lesson was taught to 5 different classes (n=80), after which a survey was given to the students to detect their attitude towards this new teaching tool. The products of the students were analysed qualitatively to explore new possibilities in writing instruction. Finally, a focus group of teachers was organized. Results indicate that using social media in EFL writing instructions affects students’ learning process as it enhances student involvement. Students feel they can improve their writing performance, thus improving learning outcome. Additionally students believe Storify to be useful in EFL practices.

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Keywords: effective teaching practices; second language teaching; social media; writing instruction; secondary schools.

1. Writing

Teaching writing is often considered as challenging, indeed Ruth Spack (1998) describes writing as “perhaps the most important skill English teachers can engage students in.” To be sure various pedagogical approaches have been developed, identifying multiple theories on language and language learning Ivanič (2004) distinguishes six ways or discourses of conceptualizing writing, linked to various pedagogical traditions. This comprehensive framework was based on the distinction made by The New Literacy Studies, distinguishing “asocial conceptualisations of literacy” as individual skills and “conceptualisations of literacy as social practices” which are culturally embedded. Ivanič (2004) defines these discourses of writing “as constellations of beliefs” concerning writing, learning to write and teaching writing. Thus these discourses can be seen as various approaches or pedagogics to writing. The framework differentiates the following discourses; the skills discourse (writing as applying linguistic knowledge) the creative discourse (in which the mental process of writing is emphasised and thus the author’s creativity) the process

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discourse (conceptualizing writing as the writer’s process and their practical realisation) the genre discourse (writing as a set of socially embedded text-types) the social practice discourse (writing “purpose-driven “functioning as a communication tool within a specific social context) and finally the socio-political discourse (writing “a socio-politically constructed practice”) influencing identity. According to Ivanič (2004) all of the above mentioned discourses could be taught in an explicit way, except for two; the creative discourse and the social practice discourse. These are implicit, as each discourse emphasises the mental process and the event of writing; the former concentrating on the author’s creativity while the latter focuses on the actual function of writing; “writing in real-life contexts,” with actual purpose. Though all approaches are equally important, and as Ivanič (2004) states, teachers often use combinations of two or more discourses in their teaching practice, she believes that it is “possible to recognise a dominant discourse at work.”

2. Web 2.0 tools & positive impact on second language learning

With the ever-growing popularity of computer-mediated communication (National Council of Teachers of English, 2012), new opportunities for second-language learning and teaching are possible. Certainly, computer-mediated communication (CMC) implies mutual and various ways of communication, offering the possibility to produce writing in real-life situated context (Sun, 2010). Research has demonstrated the positive impact of using Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs and wikis on second language learning. Miyazie and Anderson (2010) examined the impact of similar tools on learning outcomes and students perception of online writing in 2010. Their research suggests a positive effect on the language learning progress; more particularly the research revealed a positive attitude towards the use of Web 2.0 (wikis, blogs and forums) as teaching tools, wikis being most favored. The qualitative part of study showed progress in their aptitude towards using writing styles. Indeed CMC increases the learners language exposure and production, and, more importantly, improves language-learning attitude, as anxiety reduces and motivation grows (Sun, 2010) and “encourages autonomous and cooperative learning.”

Blogs, a typical and by now classic example of CMC, give the learner the possibility to upload and share information and offer great learning practices, enhancing learner autonomy (Sun, 2010), as they provide cyber-communities, thus creating a sense of belonging. Sun’s research results (2010) indicate that blogs “could constitute an effective task-based environment that prompts authentic, purposeful language use, and enhancing writing proficiency in foreign languages.” Furthermore, students are more prone to autonomous learning techniques, monitoring (reviewing and revising) their own writing process. As Snowman and Biehler (2003) observed, educators are constantly challenged to create real-life assignments, “as the situated learning theory stresses that the learning process will improve if students are confronted with authentic and/or realistic environment.” Tripp (1993) conceptualized these environments as “communities of practices,” enabling students to collaborate with experts and with each other. Accordingly within the EFL context, collaborative projects such as blogs and other Web 2.0 can thus be seen as perfect “communities of practices.”

Within CMC, social media builds on the ideological and technological platform of Web 2.0 (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), as “a group of Internet-based applications” allowing the “creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” In their classification of social media, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) recognize the social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) and social presence as the main characteristics of social media. When looking at social presence, they distinguish three levels. The first level constitutes blogs and collaborative projects (low social presences), allowing only simple exchange, the second level institutes content communities and social networking sites such as Facebook (medium social presence), both text-based communication, enabling sharing of content, pictures, etc. The highest level constitutes virtual social worlds and game worlds (high social presence). As to social process, both blogs and social networking sites score high, as both are more focused on self-disclosure and self-presentation. Within an EFL context, both blog and social networking sites, when combined, could offer enhanced student-centered writing practice; as students can benefit from User Generated content, produce and practice both purposeful and creative language (Ivanič, 2004), monitoring their writing process autonomously, all the while becoming part of these communities of practices. To be sure, when looking at the various characteristics of extensive writing (Sun 2010); writing in- and outside the classroom, writing on various topics, writing for different purposes and thus using various styles, allowing students what they write, writing at ounce’s pace and, writing with faster speed than typical, social media could offer the ultimate learning platform. Finally, as Sun (2010) mentions;
using social media endorsing students “to share their thoughts and progress in writing” with an audience, often leads to greater levels of motivation.

However, there is limited research on the effects of the use of social media on the learning opportunities for EFL students. Furthermore, as Casteleyn and Mottart (2010) remark educators are still “apprehensive” as it is “too provisional, unpredictable and uncontrollable to be marshalled for traditional learning.” Indeed Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) acknowledges this unpredictable and uncontrollable character; stating “what may be up-to-date today could have disappeared from the virtual landscape tomorrow.” Furthermore, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) advise users to be to choose cautiously (depending on the target group to reach/message to communicate) when using social media.

To better understand this apprehension of teachers, a small-scale exploratory study was conducted prior to this research, (February 2012), investigating and inquiring Flemish secondary EFL teachers’ beliefs and attitude towards computer-mediated-communication. A survey investigating EFL teaching practices and the use of ICT, was sent to 70 EFL teachers in general education, teaching English, German, and French. Additionally, teachers were free to add personal reflections on this integration and use of ICT in their practices. This study confirms the idea that teachers are still hesitant. Teachers are often anxious, as they feel that they lack the knowledge and skills to use CMC-tools in their teaching practice, believing that they could not monitor their students’ learning progress. Consequently, the majority of the respondent avoids CMC in their teaching practice. Moreover, most teachers question the above mentioned advantage of computer-mediated-communication, contesting the idea that this technology and using computers can enhance learners’ outcome, its efficiency, its motivational aspect, its creative impact, its possibility to differentiate and to encourage autonomous learning. Furthermore, they feel that they could no longer control their students’ work (e.g. plagiarism), and believe that most schools are not sufficiently equipped to fully integrate CMC within their teaching practice. In addition, some teachers fear that the boundaries between education and private matters might begin to blur. As to its possible positive impact on writing, most respondent were neutral. Nonetheless the majority is willing to use CMC in their future teaching practices in accordance to the curriculum.

3. Storify

Though computer assisted learning and teaching has been greatly researched (Yang, 2001; Young, 2002; Stockwell, 2012) few researchers investigated the social media’s potential learning outcomes in teaching practices in general, and writing instruction in EFL teaching in particular. A less known example of these social media is Storify, which stands out amongst social media, as it combines and collect content from existing multiple social network sites, fitting the User Generated Content aspect of social media. Storify prompts writing a story by adding text to the existing information, drawn from various social networks, thus generating numerous writing possibilities. This collaborative project allows, as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) state, “the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users” and thus constitutes Tripp’s conceptualized idea of “communities of practices” (1993), providing real-situated writing context within an authentic environment, in which the student can collaborate with both experts; native speakers, and peers. Furthermore Storify scores relatively high on both social presences, as it combines and draws upon various social networks and social process, as it allows the user to create his or her own “social narrative” making sense of the chosen information, building a real contextually embedded yet personal narrative – thus generating a relatively high self-presentation and disclosure. This new highly interactive and dynamic format could thus easily be used as teaching tool within the EFL teaching practices. To be sure; Storify provides student-centred writing opportunities, benefiting from the User Generated Content, producing and practicing creative, social and genre discourses, autonomous and collaborative learning, within an authentic and social environment.

Accordingly, this research wishes to examine the effectiveness of social media; more precisely the use of Storify, from the perspective of writing instruction, on learning processes; writing activities and students’ perceptions. The research questions are as follows:

1. Can the use of Storify affect writing performance?
2. Can the use of Storify affect the learning process?
3. What are the learners’ perceptions of Storify?

4. Method

4.1. Research context

In order to answer the research questions, both quantitative as qualitative methods were used. A specific lesson was designed which benefited from the social media potential of Storify. This predesigned lesson included a presentation of Storify (in which Storify and its various possibilities are elaborated), followed by a presentation of how to write an article (in which the genre-specific items are discussed and further elaborated), a brainstorm session on various topic students can write about and finally, the actual writing assignment (creating a Storify article). This assignment involved clear-cut instructions; including tips on how best to work with Storify, which specific characteristic of an article need to be met and the various evaluation criteria. The instruction explicitly asked to write an article using this new tool, thus integrating social media in the final writing products. For the latter, the lesson plan clearly instructs teachers to monitor the student’s writing, ensuring feedback and guidance.

This lesson plan was given to 5 Belgian EFL pre-service teachers, following their education at university level in Ghent (Flanders, Belgium), while working as teachers. All teachers have thus already obtained a master degree in English linguistics and literature, either combined with Spanish or Dutch linguistics and literature. All teachers were between 22 and 24 years old. Two of the teachers were male teachers, while the other three were female. At the time of the experiment (March – April 2012), four teachers were working at Flemish schools. One teacher fulfilled her practical training in Spain, as such one lesson was given in a Spanish classroom.

All students were aged between 16 and 20 years old, with an average age of 17. The majority of the students attend general education, except for one group, receiving technical education; more particularly business. This means that all the students have a similar average proficiency level for English and English writing, which when using the Common European Framework of Reference for Language can best be described as B1 to B2. Every teacher received the same lesson plan and instructions. Accordingly the predesigned lesson was taught to 5 different classes (n=80), after which a survey (Venkatesh, Michael, Davis and Davis, 2003) was given to the students to detect their attitude towards this new teaching tool.

4.2. Research instruments

The pupils perceived the writing assignment and the use of Storify, a survey based on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology model by Venkatesh, Morris, Davis and Davis was created (2003). This model, as explained in Casteleyn and Mottart (2010), was specifically designed to understand individual acceptance of new information technologies within organizations. UTAUT, acronym for Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, combines eight user acceptance model in one single unified theory, using behavioral intention as the most prominent dependent variable (Venkatesh et al, 2003; Casteleyn & Mottart, 2010). The UTAUT model enables us to explore, and thus understand, the following variable; performance expectancy (“the degree to which an individual believes using the system will help him or her to attain gains in job performance”), effort expectancy (“the degree of ease associated with the use of the system”), social influence (“degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system”), facilitation conditions (“degree to which in individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support the system) and, behavioral intention. These are perceived as direct determinants of intention. In addition self-efficacy, anxiety and attitude towards using technology, described by Venkatesh et al. (2010) as “indirect determinants of intention fully mediated by perceived ease of use” were added to the survey (table 1 & 2) as they are significant predictors of intention. No other determinants were added. The original statements, 30 in total, were translated to Dutch, the pupils first language. A 5-point Likert scale was used, from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

In addition, we asked the teachers to give a detailed description of the lesson, once the lesson was given. The writing products were looked at by the teacher, and their personal views on the new technology, both positive as
negative aspects, were presented. More specifically, we would like to know if they, as EFL teachers, would use this tool again in their future practice.

5. Results

Due to the small sample size, two types of analysis will be discussed: a basis analysis and a correlation analysis. No other tests groups can be used as comparison nor can it be compared with other technologies. Consequently, we believe that a different analysis would deliver intricate results and might thus be invalid.

Table 1. Key figures of the determinants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determinant</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance expectancy</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>2,5556</td>
<td>1,09088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort expectancy</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>3,4389</td>
<td>1,01432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards using technology</td>
<td>1,25</td>
<td>4,75</td>
<td>3,0611</td>
<td>0,86464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social influence</td>
<td>1,50</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>3,3000</td>
<td>0,79665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating conditions</td>
<td>1,50</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>3,2333</td>
<td>0,87321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>1,25</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>2,7667</td>
<td>0,84380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>1,25</td>
<td>4,75</td>
<td>3,0722</td>
<td>1,12614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural intention to use the system</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>5,00</td>
<td>2,4000</td>
<td>1,12614</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 offers an overview of the results of the eight determinants. These were scored by the participants on a five point Likert scale. Additionally, the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the factors are given.

Several items are quite interesting. The effort expectancy, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and behavioural intention are most remarkable. It seems that the students believe that using Storify is quite easy to learn and use, yet they are uncertain about whether using Storify might improve their performance. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the students believed that they were capable of working and creating interesting texts, that all the necessary supporting tools were present, and that the teachers’ support was unlimited, the majority of the pupils did not intend to use Storify again. Nonetheless, the fairly low score (MD=2.400, SD=1.2614) on anxiety seems to indicate that Storify is not that intimidating or threatening to use. Likewise when looking at self-efficacy, the same conclusion can be drawn.

Table 2 offers an overview of the correlations among the eight determinants. There is a strong positive correlation between attitude towards technology and performance expectancy, indicating that students do believe that appreciating, and thus using, Storify can improve their ability to write in English. Additionally, a positive correlation between behavioural intention to use the system and attitude towards using technology suggests that pupils would use Storify again. Similarly, there is a strong correlation between the facilitating conditions and effort expectancy. Furthermore, a positive among social influence, self-efficacy, and attitude towards using technology can be observed. As expected, the educational context seems to be quite significant when introducing and using Storify. Remarkably a significant positive correlation between anxiety and performance expectancy can be observed, implying that although pupils may fear using this technology they still believe Storify to be useful. Lastly, a negative correlation exists between anxiety, effort expectancy, and facilitating conditions. Both are quite logical; failing conditions (e.g. service breakdown, etc.) can influence one’s effort expectancy thus creating anxiety.

Table 2. Correlation analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determinant</th>
<th>PE</th>
<th>EE</th>
<th>ATUT</th>
<th>SI</th>
<th>FC</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>BI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance Expectancy (PE)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort expectancy (EE)</td>
<td>-.308*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards using technology (ATUT)</td>
<td>.639**</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the qualitative part of the study, the educators were asked to give an exact overview of the lesson in which positive and negative features of the practice of Storify could be elaborated. All teachers believe this concept to be interesting, original and useful, as Storify “connects a writing assignment, often boring and difficult, with modern technologies of social media.” Furthermore, some teachers were positive about how pupils become aware of the subjectivity of news report and difficulty of selecting and using useful information from the internet; “Storify was instructive about finding different sources and combining these.” Though the educators were uncertain of the positive influence of using Storify on their writing skills after one try – students produce less complex language often using simple syntactic structures –, they all agree on the fact, that when used regularly, Storify might contribute to their writing skills when used as complementary writing assignment to the more traditional approaches, “this way the quality and efficiency of their writing will go up.”

As to the negative aspects, all educators encountered similar problems. The most recurrent and impeding issues, were ICT-related problems; limited computer equipment and access, incompatible servers and unbreakable firewalls. Although all students are quite familiar with social media, it seemed that some students were reluctant – and thus unwilling - to use their Facebook account, which was needed in order to create a Storify account, for school work. Finally, some educators feared they would run out of time to fulfil all activities in class, thus minimalizing their responsibility as teachers. All educators believe that the pupils should be given sufficient time to fully get acquainted with the use and possibilities of Storify in order to achieve “qualitative and efficient writing.” In spite of these obstacle, all educators seemed positive towards using Storify.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Using Storify appears to affect students “learning involvement and process.” This new teaching tool as notion of “communities of practice,” enhances student involvement, as it encourages the students to review and revising both their own and peers’ narratives. This confirms the idea that CMC practice encourages learners to review output meaning and structure, thus fostering learner autonomy, claiming authorship for their narratives and complementing their colleagues’ stories (Sun, 2010). Though the respondents were uncertain about improved performance, the students acknowledge that writing a story using Storify is achievable. Additionally, the results show that students were certain that they were able to produce creative and interesting texts, often positively surprised at the end result. This indicates that the real-life situated environment, curating authentic yet more informal and often spontaneous language use from various networking sites, influences the genre discourse. Students seem to be aware of their wide audience and environment; using the social environment abundantly –, adapt their writing styles creating both socially embedded and communicative narratives. This could partially be explained, as Sun mentions (2010) by Salaberry’s idea that a shift is noticeable from a more structured, teacher-centred environment to a more informal genre of communication, i.e. CMC (1996). Yet caution must be taken, as the task was still set within the highly structured setting of a classroom, with students fully aware that their products would be read and marked by their teacher. In accordance with
Salaberry’s idea of a genre shift (1996), teachers believe that Storify could improve students’ ability to select process and adapt information, thus improving the genre discourse, and learning outcome. The aim of this research is to investigate Storify’s potential learning outcomes on writing instruction and students perceptions.

Though the results of this study indicate possible learning outcomes, as learner autonomy, language awareness and writing ability were influenced, and prompts motivation and a higher sense of self-achievement, there are limitations to this study.

Further research, inquiring larger groups of respondents, including both experienced and less-experienced learners, are needed in order to claim noticeable learning outcomes. This research specifically focused on the motivational aspect of the students’ perception and teachers’ perception and beliefs towards this tool. The writing products were taken into account, but no language tests were undertaken. Therefore, taken into account the positive results, further research including sample tests could confirm the above-mentioned possible performance improvement.

7. References


