Social Networking Interaction In Foreign Language Teaching To Non-Linguistic Learners

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Abstract
This study investigates the practical experience of using social networking interaction for educational purposes. The feedback elicited from 82 members of the social networking "closed" "Flyingcats English" group was analyzed. The main findings reveal that social networking interaction allows to achieve certain teaching goals and meet learning needs of the digital generation of learners. Social networking interaction supplements the face-to-face classes and accumulates the best features of the Blended Learning technology such as round-the-clock and round-the-world availability and accessibility of training materials, ease of usage, enhancement of learning strategies and self-organization, increase of learners' autonomy, eco-friendliness. The study highlighted that social networking interaction is able to perform informative, managerial, communicative, instructional, training, creative, productive, promotional, and inspirational functions. In summary, social networking interaction turns out to be a powerful motivational tool which encourages extrinsically motivated learners to become interested in improving skills and enhancing foreign language competence. The study found that an increase of the teacher's time spent on electronic materials development and online activities represents a relative inconvenience of using social networks for educational purposes. Although, this inconvenience can be compensated by the fact that a great number of the teacher-made materials appear to be Reusable Learning Objects and can be used on a long term basis.

Keywords: Social networking interaction, blended learning, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation

Introduction
Nowadays, foreign language education is facing a number of formidable challenges like academic mobility of specialists, life-long learning necessity, relative stagnation of traditional classroom education,

increased learners' demands, lack of learners' motivation, need for novelty of instruction, educational use of electronic devices, etc. Current net generation learners are not satisfied with the classical classroom training any more. They want to be educated in an engaging, inspirational, motivational and interactive environment. To withstand and survive the current situation, social networking interaction is being implemented in English language teaching to non-linguistic higher education students of the Institute of Chemistry and Biology (the ICB) of Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University (the IKBFU), Kaliningrad, Russia. Traditional face-to-face lessons are supplemented with digital interaction of the teacher and students by means of the "Flyingcats English" group created on the platform of the popular social network vk.com. The theoretical basis of the "Flyingcats English" group formation and the analysis of its practical effectiveness are presented in the paper.

Theoretical basis

In order to develop a workable interactive educational environment on the Internet, the creators of the "Flyingcats English" group concentrate on certain theoretical concepts which proved to be essential for meeting learning needs of the digital generation.

Firstly, the "Flyingcats English" group is based on the blended learning approach which is "a combination of face-to-face delivery with eLearning activities" (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 6).

Secondly, the "Flyingcats English" group bears the features of asynchronous eLearning which is self-paced and allows learners to go through the training materials "as quickly or as slowly as they desire at their convenience" (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 5). Podcasts, forums, blogs, net publics, and wikis are the most preferable asynchronous networking tools used by modern learners.

Thirdly, the "Flyingcats English" group realizes the importance of the person's motivation for successful studies. According to Marina Arshavskiy, a seasoned instructional designer, there are different types of motivation. Intrinsically motivated learners are inspired by internal drivers and enjoy learning. While extrinsically motivated learners are inspired by external drivers and are aimed at getting certificates and good grades rather than acquiring skills (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 32). As the "Flyingcats English" Group addresses non-linguistic learners, the problem of their motivation is absolutely vital. Oftentimes, the majority of such learners is extrinsically motivated, that is why the format and content of their education must be a matter of particular consideration.

Fourthly, successful training is impossible without meeting learners' psychological needs. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs,

effective education only takes place in a safe environment where needs for belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization are satisfied (Maslow, 1943). Learners must know that they are the part of the community, that they are respected, and that they can pass their own remarks revealing their individuality. Admitting the crucial role of learners' inner needs, the "Flyingcats English" group aims to create a comfortable environment in which learners feel free to share their opinions, ask questions and be sure to receive prompt and supportive feedback in return.

Fifthly, recognizing the priority of performance over training principle, the "Flyingcats English" group offers a number of practical activities to be fulfilled by their participants. These activities address learners' personal experience and allow them "to apply their new knowledge and skills to real-life situations" (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 34). Such tasks as photo projects, blog writing and presentation making are particularly enjoyed by teenage learners because they give them an opportunity to express their personality and creativity.

Last but not least, educational interaction is a two-way process. It should be beneficial not only to students, but also to the teacher, who devotes a great deal of time to developing the training content. One of the most meaningful positive aspects of networking educational interaction is that it makes possible for teachers to create and use training components which are known as Reusable Training Objects. They are "designed as standalone objects" (Arshavskiy, 2013, p. 102) and can be used in different teaching contexts during long periods of time. All the materials made by the "Flyingcats English" group are the unique author's products. They are created using the same style, and they bear the recognizable logo of the "Flyingcats English" group. A large proportion of training materials developed by the "Flyingcats English" group are Reusable Training Objects. The "Flyingcats English" group's Reusable Training Objects include materials devoted to mastering grammar, vocabulary, the IKBFU's history, the ICB's history, the UK's traditions, etc. Time spent on their development is repaid by their long term use. Moreover, the upgrade of the existing Reusable Training Objects takes far less time than the creation of the new ones.

Practical effectiveness analysis
"Flyingcats English" group description

The "Flyingcats English" group was created on the popular social networking platform vk.com in 2012 for students of Dr. Irina Ostroverkhaia, PhD in Linguistics. The privacy setting of the group is "Closed" that is its content can be seen and used only by its current members. The goal of the group is to assist and to inspire the training process of non-linguistic students

of the ICB of the IKBFU. The "Flyingcats English" group provides an electronic support to face-to-face university classes. The recognizable logo of the "Flyingcats English" group depicts two winged cats looking at each other. The slogan of the group reads, "Flyingcats English": coming off with Flying Colours". For the time being (March 2016), there are 110 group members, including 1 teacher-administrator, 92 current students and 17 former students who proved to be active after finishing their university English language course. The rotation of members takes place after each term. About 80% of the group members have extrinsic motivation for learning English because their priority is getting a university degree in Chemistry or Biology rather than developing and enhancing language skills. The members' level of English skills varies from Pre-Intermediate (A2 according to the CEFR) to Intermediate (B1 according to the CEFR).

Survey details

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the social networking interaction in the English language teaching to non-linguistic learners, the online survey was conducted in March 2016. The 3 open-ended questions were included into the survey:

(1) Is the social networking "Flyingcats English" group an effective way of educational interaction and why?

(2) Are there any inconveniences about the "Flyingcats English" group?

(3) What would you like to improve in the "Flyingcats English" group?

The questions were posted on the Wall of the "Flyingcats English" group. Participants were asked to send their answers by a personal message to the teacher. Within 3 days, the feedback came from 82 participants (including 69 current students and 13 former students) which makes about 75% of the group members. The analysis of the members' feedback allowed to identify advantages, inconveniences, and prospects for further development. The findings of the survey are presented below.

Advantages

The advantages of the "Flyingcats English" group are determined by its activities which are carried out in the online "rooms" because they accumulate certain resources combined by mutual purposes. The "Flyingcats English" group functions as *Info-Room, Study-Room, Work-Room, Show-Room*, and *Play-Room*.

Info-Room performs informative, managerial, and communicative functions. It contains *Discussions* listing tasks which must be done by learners of a particular speciality and course while preparing for the

forthcoming face-to-face classes; *Wall Announcements* providing information about the common events like Olympiads, changes in the schedule, and group quizzes; *Hot Line* allowing to ask questions and receive quick replies from the teacher and members of the group. Info-Room helps the teacher to manage the training process. It also assists students in organizing their learning as they are taught to meet deadlines for completion and become more organized. *The respondents wrote,* "It is always easy to find information about the homework in the group, and it is a very useful format" (Respondent 32); "With the help of this group we always exactly know what we must prepare for the next lesson" (Respondent 10); "You don't need to annoy your classmates by asking them about the homework if you miss the lesson. All navigation is perfectly clear" (Respondent 77); "We can ask questions to our teacher if something is unclear. This is a very good connection of students and the teacher" (Respondent 17); "The group is cool. I've never seen that before. You can ask questions online. There is the community of students who are eager to help" (Respondent 80); "The group helps us to interact with the teacher" (Respondent 59); "I'm satisfied with the group. It is always possible to learn about some events and other useful and interesting things in time" (Respondent 28).

Study-Room performs instructional and training functions. It contains *Electronic Resources* supplementing face-to-face classes and allowing learners to enhance their language competence; *Useful Links* to free authentic Internet resources for learning English; *Training Manuals* helping to master English for Specific Purposes in the fields of Biology and Chemistry. Study-Room promotes learners' autonomy and independence because learners have an opportunity to work at their own pace using the online resources which are easily accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from any point having access to the Internet. One more obvious advantage of social networking interaction is its paperless and environmentally friendly nature thanks to the fact that all the resources made by the "Flyingcats English" group are freely downloadable onto learners' personal computers, tablets, and smartphones. *The respondents wrote,* "The group "Flyingcats English" is our "education material". It helps me very much because I can download any file to my phone and use it for studies. It saves money for copies=)))) And helps to preserve the environment too)) (Respondent 19); "Here we may always find everything we need: grammar tables, rules, worksheets, presentations and so on. We know that our teacher creates these materials specially for us. She wants us to improve our skills. It's an excellent group!!! With soul and love!!!❤ (Respondent 56); "It's brilliant that there are electronic word-building tables and exercises in the group. They help me to enrich my vocabulary and lexicon" (Respondent 47)"; I enjoy colorful presentations that help you better learn the traditions and customs of the British"

(Respondent 41); "Thematic presentations make information more understandable" (Respondent 63); "One of the best benefits of the "Flyingcats English" is that it has lots of useful materials concerning our specialization. The group helps us to learn professional English" (Respondent 75); "The group "Flyingcats English" is great! It contains useful links to the websites, which help to prepare for different Cambridge exams (PET, FCE, etc.)" (Respondent 78); "The "Flyingcats English" helps to find links to great resources for studying English (for example Spotlight Radio English). I can structure my knowledge with the help of clear tables and English-Russian examples" (Respondent 38); "Training material is always accessible in the group. There we can find different interesting presentations and even jokes in English. It is very convenient to have useful links in one place. Thank you very much for the group "Flyingcats English":))" (Respondent 27).

Work-Room performs creative and productive functions. It contains *Step-by-Step Instructions* for making projects; *Requirements* for making presentations; *Blog Writing Tasks*. Work-Room activities are aimed at learners' practical performance and creating a real product. The most distinctive feature of making such products is combination of writing skills, visualization, and creativity. Its philosophy is "Learning by Doing". The products developed by learners testify the level of the learners' confidence in foreign language acquisition. The learners' feedback highlights that product creation is the most favourite and enjoyable type of activity. *The respondents wrote,* "Photo projects are my favourite ones. I can express my inner self by making them" (Respondent 29); "Writing blogs is awesome! I can tell my classmates about the true events of my life" (Respondent 31); "I'm keen on photo projects because I can use my own pictures for learning English" (Respondent 44); "Our teacher often gives creative tasks. This is great for students!" (Respondent 5); "I was on cloud nine when my project "Kaliningrad is …" won the first prize!" (Respondent 13); "Making projects motivates me to learn something new. If the task is creative, I can use my imagination" (Respondent 9).

Show-Room performs a promotional function. It contains *Group Photoalbum* showing the group pictures; *Project Albums* demonstrating the best photo projects made by the group participants; *Student Presentations Discussion* storing the best learners' presentations. Show-Room is aimed at preserving the "Flyingcats English" group's history and disseminating the best learners' experiences. *The respondents wrote,* "Watching projects is fun! It's interesting to see them because they are made by students for students!" (Respondent 11); "The group makes our studies more interesting and pleasurable because of photos which we show for our projects. I think it is the best alternative to formal way of education" (Respondent 19); "The

group "Flyingcats English" offers a new system of training. Here, we share our projects. I enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the group. There is no pressure at all" (Respondent 26); "There are a lot of presentations and projects. This creates a pleasant and good atmosphere" (Respondent 70).

Play-Room performs an inspirational function. It contains activities which are not related to the formal side of the university course, for example humorous posts, mems, quizzes, open-ended questions, interviews, surveys, videos and audios. Play-Room is aimed at creating a comfortable environment for communication, encouraging students to learn English, making learners feel the part of the community. *The respondents wrote,* "The funny name of the group – "Flyingcats English" – creates the positive atmosphere to study English" (Respondent 43); "As for me, I like everything in the "Flyingcats English". In the group, there are only my students of the institute and cute cats, which makes us a great team=)" (Respondent 17); "I think it's a very funny group, connected with English and cats :) The logo is so cute. The motto is interesting too, it helps to learn idioms" (Respondent 24); "Interesting articles, cute cats and friendly atmosphere. It's cool!" (Respondent 57); "There is a friendly community, cheerful material and cute cats))" (Respondent 42); "Students in the group often joke and it makes me positive" (Respondent 1); "Informative posts and funny pictures create a special atmosphere of comfort in the group" (Respondent 73); "I like that I can see not only educational information in the group, but also holiday greetings and funny pictures including the original group logo" (Respondent 80); "Combination of information and cats is a perfect duet for me. It's a funny way of studies" (Respondent 32).

Inconveniences

The feedback elicited from the group members proved that the "Flyingcats English" group is beneficial for interaction between students and the teacher. All the respondents unanimously highlighted that there are no inconveniences for learners. The only one inconvenience is the time-consuming nature of the teacher's work on materials preparation and the group administration, which was mentioned by the 2 respondents. *The respondents wrote,* "The disadvantage of this group is that the teacher has to spend a lot time on preparing useful training materials for students" (Respondent 41); "It must have taken the teacher tons of time to make all these tables and posts" (Respondent 38). As practice shows, this relative teacher's inconvenience can be compensated by the fact that a great number of the teacher-made materials appear to be Reusable Learning Objects and can be used on a long term basis.

Prospects for further development

Several constructive proposals have been made by participants of the survey. The 3 respondents came up with a very useful suggestion concerning the technical part of the "Flyingcats English" group's operation. In order to enhance navigation, it is proposed to add hashtags for easier search. *The respondents wrote,* "In my opinion, it would be nice if a search by hashtags were added (Respondent 20); "I think you can use the hashtags for easy search" (Respondent 35); "You can use hashtags to share information on topics" (Respondent 30). The feedback received from 32 respondents contains the word "more". Learners need "more quizzes" (Respondent 8); "more visual English" (Respondent 10); "more modern slang" (Respondent 11); "more funny posts and jokes" (Respondent 13); "more information about the UK" (Respondent 14); "more surveys, quizzes and puzzles" (Respondent 23); "more interesting photos" (Respondent 24); "more reference materials" (Respondent 33); "more information about modern books for studying English" (Respondent 38); "more competitions" (Respondent 39); "more idioms" (Respondent 45); "more information about chemistry in English" (Respondent 48); "more creative tasks" (Respondent 52); "more interesting biological facts" (Respondent 57); "more contests with prizes" (Respondent 59), "more humorous publics" (Respondent 61), etc. Such willingness of respondents to improve the group's interface and receive more edutainment leads to the conclusion that the "Flyingcats English" group appears to be an effective way of interaction between the teacher and the digital generation of learners.

Conclusion

Implementation of social networking interaction into foreign language teaching to non-linguistic learners proved to be effective and beneficial to both learners and the teacher because it allows to achieve certain teaching goals and meet learning needs of the digital generation of learners. The feedback elicited from the learners showed that social networking interaction supplements the face-to-face classes and accumulates the best features of the blended learning technology such as round-the-clock and round-the-world availability and accessibility of training materials, ease of usage, enhancement of learning strategies and self-organization, increase of learners' autonomy, eco-friendliness. The study highlighted that social networking interaction is able to perform informative, managerial, communicative, instructional, training, creative, productive, promotional, and inspirational functions. In summary, social networking interaction turns out to be a powerful motivational tool which encourages extrinsically motivated learners to become interested in improving skills and enhancing foreign language competence.

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The effectiveness of using social networking interaction for teaching purposes is best described in the respondent's answer. It reads, "I wish every teacher had such a group for the students" (Respondent 14).

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