

## FACEBOOK AS A TOOL FOR L2 PRACTICE

Kyria Rebeca Finardi \*

Jéssica Malacarne Covre \*\*

Ludmila Boldrini Santos \*\*\*

Sabrina Ponath Peruzzo \*\*\*\*

Carlos Alberto Hildeblando Junior \*\*\*\*\*

**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to reflect about affordances of using a social network - Facebook – in the realm of L2 learning and teaching. With that aim the study reviews the notions of attention and production in L2 and one method for L2 teaching - the Task-based approach- relating them to the possibilities of using Facebook for L2 practice. Results of the study suggest that Facebook offers many features that are aligned with theories of L2 learning and can be used to foster L2 practice both in blended methodologies and as a complement to traditional L2 methodologies.

**Keywords:** Facebook. Communicative approach. L2 practice.

**Resumo:** Este estudo tem como objetivo refletir sobre o potencial de uso de uma rede social – Facebook – no contexto de ensino e aprendizagem de L2. Com esse objetivo o estudo revisa as noções de atenção e produção em L2 e uma metodologia de ensino de L2 – o ensino de línguas baseado em tarefas – relacionando-os com as possibilidades de uso do Facebook no âmbito da prática em L2. Os resultados do estudo sugerem que o Facebook oferece muitas possibilidades alinhadas com teorias de aprendizado de L2 e que pode ser usado para a prática de L2 tanto em metodologias híbridas quanto como complemento a metodologias tradicionais de ensino de L2.

**Palavras-chave:** Facebook. Método comunicativo. Prática em L2.

### Introduction

This paper reflects about the possibility of enhancing practice in an L2– in this case English – through the interaction in a social networking - Facebook. According to L2 researchers (for example BROWN, 2007; DEKEYSER, 2007) learning involves practice which we suggest may be achieved, in the case of English as an L2, through the interaction in social networks.

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\* Doutora em Linguística Aplicada e Letras Inglês e professora do Departamento de Linguagens, Cultura e Educação e dos Programas de Pós Graduação em Linguística (PPGEL) e Educação (PPGE) da Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo. E-mail: kyria.finardi@gmail.com

\*\* Graduanda Letras Inglês Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo. E-mail: jessicamcovre@hotmail.com

\*\*\* Graduanda Letras Inglês Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo. E-mail: sabrina\_p\_p@hotmail.com

\*\*\*\* Graduanda Letras Inglês Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo. E-mail: sabrina\_p\_p@hotmail.com

\*\*\*\*\* Graduando Letras Inglês Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo. E-mail: carloshildeblando@hotmail.com

Brazil is the 5th most populated country in the world with a significant number of social network users. In 2011 the number of Facebook users in Brazil was more than 12 million, compared to the current 67 million today, an increase of 458% (FOLHA PRESS, 2013). Yet, according to the English First<sup>1</sup> report that compares proficiency in the English language in 54 countries, Brazil is on the 46<sup>th</sup> position in a ranking among 54 countries, a position we Brazilians are not proud of, especially when we consider the fact that our country is the fifth largest economy and one of the largest internet markets.

The increase in internet access seems to be inversely proportional to the increase of English users in Brazil. Given the scenario described above and relating it to L2 learning, Warschauer (2002) questions the role of English and technology as forms of access to information. According to the researcher we may ask ourselves if technology is a tool for learning languages or whether learning languages (in this case English) is a tool for accessing information (in the internet). Finardi, Prebianca and Momm (2013) suggest that both English and internet are inclusion languages in the sense that those who can access information online in English are able to participate actively in the globalized world we live in.

According to Belloni (2005), the advancement of technology can be felt in many social processes and institutions. Yet, research on technology in education seems to lag behind as suggest Ren et al. (2009) who claim that in the case of Brazil there are very few studies showing general patterns of access to technology and its use in language education. The present study represents an attempt to fill in this gap by offering insights into possible uses of a social network in the realm of L2 education.

Facebook is one of the most accessed social networks with over 1 billion active users worldwide with Brazil heading to the 2<sup>nd</sup> position on this rank. Through Facebook users are able to interact with other users of different cultures and language backgrounds in a meaningful way. The present study analyzes some features of Facebook which may be used in L2 education making suggestions of how this social network can be used to enable L2 interaction in a meaningful way enhancing contact with the target language, practice in L2 and learners' autonomy. With that aim the next

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<sup>1</sup> English First is a report that compares proficiency in the English Language in 54 countries based on a sample of almost 2 million people. Available at: <http://www.ef.com.br/epi/>. (accessed April 18<sup>th</sup> 2013)

session reviews some concepts related to L2 learning contrasting them with features of Facebook to analyze affordances and limitations of this social network for L2 practice.

## **Social Networks and L2**

Warschauer and Haeley (1998, cited in FRANCO 2010, p. 6) suggest that “The computer should be utilized as a form of valorizing the marginal elements in language teaching, such as, for example, the isolated treating of the four basic abilities of language (listen, speak, read and write).” Based on this suggestion we can add that internet, more than just computers, represents a powerful resource to develop the four skills in L2 since it offers authentic and meaningful materials for all skills.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century generation cannot go without internet which provides immediate contact with people and information around this increasingly flatter world (FRIEDMAN, 2005). This may be relevant for education if we think about the amount and quality of information available online and the role of the teacher in this scenario. It is important to bear in mind that not all information available on the internet is useful or can be relied on and that is why it is very important to know how to use internet in our favor.

Finardi (in press, 2013, b) reviews Freire’s notion of critical pedagogy in which the teacher is not responsible for transmitting (or *depositing* to use Freire’s term) information but instead helps learners to analyze information and develop critical thinking skills. Finardi (in press, 2013, b) suggests that a critical L2 pedagogy is the one which helps learners to think critically but in another language. In the information era we live in the teacher no longer has the most updated information and can only hope to help students develop critical thinking skills to filter and analyze the information available in the cyberspace (LÉVY, 1999). In that sense, we suggest that this study may contribute to L2 teacher education by offering insights into how teachers can use the information available in a social network- Facebook- for L2 practice so that they can make informed decisions. Given the amount of social network users in Brazil and the internet potential for meaningful interaction in English as an L2, teachers may benefit from suggestions of how to use this form of communication in the realm of L2 practice.

Baralt (2007) analyzed some possibilities of network use for language practice and learning given the expanding opportunities for instantaneous (synchronous)

communication afforded by network interactions. According to Baralt (2007), there are over 100 social networks available with open membership. Because of that, these social networks offer multiple languages for communication. Given the possibility to select the language to communicate in a meaningful way, it is possible to suggest that social networks may be a relevant pedagogical tool to promote multicultural awareness as well as contact with the target language in meaningful interactions. Moreover, interaction in social networks can enhance digital literacy, as suggested by Godwin-Jones (2006) exposing the learner to authentic language use.

Yet, when it comes to using social networks for L2 practice it is important to bear in mind Baralt's (2007) recommendation that before incorporating any piece of technology in teaching methodologies, we should turn to theories of second language acquisition (hereafter SLA). In that sense, the present study suggests that the inclusion of social networks in L2 methodologies can be foregrounded by theoretical underpinnings of at least three concepts of second language acquisition, namely: the notion of meaningful interactions through tasks from the Task-based language teaching approach (hereafter TBLT) (for example ELLIS, 2003); the notion of noticing (SCHMIDT, 1995, 2001) and the notion of production (SWAIN, 1995).

TBLT is an approach to L2 teaching which provides learners with real-world tasks to learn the language. According to this approach languages are learned when learners focus on meaning to execute the tasks, focusing on form only incidentally when they notice the gaps in their linguistic repertoire. According to Ellis (2003, p. 3) a task "requires the participants to function primarily as 'language users' in the sense that they must employ the same kinds of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities."

The TBLT approach is based on psycholinguist research (for example FINARDI, 2010; SKEHAN, 1998) and incorporates notions of noticing and production of the Noticing and Output Hypotheses respectively (SCHMIDT, 1995, 2001; SWAIN, 1995). According to Schmidt (1995), the Noticing Hypothesis assumes that people cannot learn languages if they do not notice forms in the input transforming this input into intake (no pun intended). Based on that idea of L2 learning, it is possible to suggest that teachers should create tasks to help learners notice critical features (not only the form but also gaps in their interlanguage) in language thus processing this information in a meaningful way and the form in an incidental way.

According to the Output Hypothesis (SWAIN, 1993, p.159), learners must produce language to notice the gaps in their interlanguage since “producing language forces learners to recognize what they do not know or know only partially”. Moreover, and still according to the Output Hypothesis, producing language forces learners to process information in a syntactic way. The problem with L2 methodologies based on language comprehension (for example the Input Hypothesis) is that syntactic processing can be circumvented during language comprehension since learners may rely on contextual cues to decode messages during language comprehension but that is not the case during language production (FINARDI, 2010). Given the need to process language syntactically, on the one hand, and the possibility to avoid this processing during language comprehension, on the other, Swain (1995 cited in FINARDI, 2010) claims that language comprehension is not enough to guarantee L2 acquisition, production is also needed to force the learner to process language syntactically thus moving beyond a certain proficiency level.

During interaction in another language, learners are pushed to process language syntactically and also to produce comprehensible input so that they can be understood. From that, this study suggests that online tasks in social networks may be relevant tools to comprehend and produce L2 in a meaningful way. According to Baralt (2007, p. 281):

*having this opportunity to carry out real-world tasks, to receive authentic input in a social network setting and to pay attention to forms, receive feedback and also have the opportunity to produce output, are what makes social networking sites an ideal medium for language practice.*

Another important fact highlighted by Baralt (2007) is that the interaction in social networks may enable learners to notice online e-discourses omnipresent in social network settings using it for L2 online output. How this may happen still needs to be explored and represents a relevant topic of future research endeavors.

Baralt (2007) suggests some ways to choose an existent network for L2 practice or research describing some networks based on their popularity, language options and technological platforms pointing out that while some social networks can be used in

more than one language, others are used in only one language and more accessed in a specific country. Baralt also offers 2 tables comparing social networks in terms of founder, year of creation, number of users, accessibility, synchronicity, chat availability, language availability and whether it is monitored.

Not all the social networks reviewed by Baralt (2007) are fit for L2 practice though, some are job search groups whereas others are for socializing or dating. Thus, we suggest that social networks are spaces where people can interact for different social purposes including L2 practice through the contact with the target language and native-speaker's colloquialisms, e-abbreviations, and other forms of e-discourse (including more recently, social and political discourse)<sup>2</sup>.

Still according to Baralt (2007), the social network Orkut would be ideal for L2 practice, though no one has attempted to use this site as a tool to promote Portuguese as an L2 or for language practice as far as we know and except for Lima and Finardi (in press) who describe how Orkut was used in regular English classes in a public school in Brazil. It is important to note that Baralt's study dates from 2007 when Orkut, a Brazilian social network, was the most popular in Brazil and that Lima and Finardi's study (in press) was carried out in 2011 when there were still some Orkut users who have now migrated to Facebook. As it is, we can think of Baralt's suggestions concerning the use of Orkut for language education as now referring to Facebook instead.

As the most popular social network of all times, Facebook may represent an ideal environment for English learners and teachers to work together (though physically separate) in a meaningful way. Facebook offers many tools that can be associated with the notions of L2 learning reviewed here: authentic and meaningful interactions, attention and production in L2 and also the execution of tasks. In other words, Facebook can be used by teachers and students as an extension of the classroom and perhaps, what is more important in the case of L2 learning, as an extension of meaningful interactions with the world in the target language (not to mention the possibility to produce social and political discourse in L2).

Whether Facebook is used as a plus in traditional L2 classes that use blended methodologies that incorporate technology, or as a way to increase contact with the

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<sup>2</sup> See for instances the social protests and marches that have been happening in Brazil lately and that were arranged and commented about in Facebook.

target language in a meaningful way by learners, its affordances for L2 practice justify a careful scrutiny of its possibilities.

Regarding the use of blended methodologies, Finardi (2012), after reviewing four studies that used blended methodologies for L2 teaching concluded that hybrid or blended methodologies that incorporate the use of computers in traditional classes are the best approach to L2 teaching. The present study goes a step further to suggest that blended methodologies should also incorporate social networks.

Even if we use only traditional approaches to L2, Facebook can be incorporated in L2 traditional methodologies as will be shown next. Regarding traditional approaches to L2 teaching, the most frequently used approach to L2 teaching in Brazil is the Communicative Approach (hereafter CA) to language teaching which is described by Canale and Swain (1980, p. 27) as an approach based on learners' communication needs which must be specified in terms of grammatical competence (e.g. the levels of grammatical accuracy that are required in oral and written communication), sociolinguistic competence (e.g. needs relating to setting, topic, communicative functions) and strategic competence (e.g. compensatory communication strategies to be used when there is a breakdown in one of the other competencies). Canale and Swain (1980, p. 27) also claim that "the second language learner must have the opportunity to part in meaningful communicative interaction with highly competent speakers of the language" so as to learn an L2. Most Brazilian students of English do not have the opportunity to go abroad to part in meaningful interactions with other speakers of English. According to Lima and Finardi (in press) the CA is based on the idea that L2 learning should be oriented to the use of the target language in real situations. The teacher's role in this approach is that of facilitator, promoting opportunities for meaningful communication in the target language. The present study suggests that this role can be achieved through the interaction in Facebook.

## **Methodology**

In order to reflect about possibilities of using Facebook as a tool to enhance L2 practice the present study analyzed notions and approaches to L2 learning so as to compare with features of Facebook which may be related to these notions and approaches. The features of Facebook analyzed were the Chat and Video Calling, the News Feed and Timeline, the Pages, the Groups and the Applications. These features of

Facebook were then contrasted with notions of L2 learning reviewed in this study (noticing, production, meaningful and authentic interaction) to verify whether it can be conducive of L2 practice.

### **Analysis**

Facebook has many interaction options which include (but are not limited to) the possibility to create a profile with a timeline where users can share information in the form of photos, images, videos, texts and links with their friends. According to Ellis (1993, p. 109) “practice involves an attempt to supply the learner with plentiful opportunities for producing targeted structures in controlled and free language use in order to develop fully proceduralized implicit knowledge.” Facebook can offer opportunities for free language use thus complementing the production of targeted structures in controlled classroom language use. In what follows some features of Facebook which can be used for L2 free language practice will be analyzed.

### **Chat and Video Calling**

A chat room enables users to send and receive instantaneous messages in a synchronous way. Users may also send emoticons - characters that typically represent a facial expression or suggest an attitude or emotion. To use Facebook’s chat, users must accept someone’s request as their friend first. An option to use Facebook’s chat for L2 practice is to accept friends who use the target language.

Communicating in a chat can enable learners to receive authentic and comprehensible forms of input in the L2. Chats have many features of informal and authentic language such as intense use of abbreviation and acronyms, which may enable learners to be exposed to this type of language. Another advantage of using chats is the possibility to negotiate meaning, which, according to Long and Porter (1985) may lead to L2 learning.

It is also possible to have a synchronous conversation with audio and video in the chat with the two interlocutors in different places thus maximizing the opportunity to practice listening and speaking skills in the L2. Relating this feature of Facebook to Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1993) we can say that when chatting and communicating via video calling students have the opportunity to produce language. We can also relate

this feature of Facebook with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1994) since chats enable learners to understand messages in the L2, thus receiving comprehensible input.

Relating Facebook's chat with the Communicative approach, we suggest that this feature of Facebook fosters L2 learning inasmuch as it enables communication in real-life situations with authentic language.

### **News Feed and Timeline**

A timeline is a feature of Facebook that contains information posted by the user which may be updated with user's likes. These updates and feeds also appear in the user's friends news feed. By sharing personal content on the news feed with friends, users can interact in a meaningful way in the L2. This is also related to the Communicative Approach suggestion of having meaningful and authentic interactions in the L2.

Users can also receive feedback about their posting. One idea to create an interaction in a news feed to practice L2 would be to propose a discussion in the news feed in the L2. Regarding the function of maintaining social interactions through the news feed, Blattner and Fiori (2009, p. 03) assert that "staying in touch with the friends-network is also facilitated by a series of notifications that users can receive informing them for instance of friends' status or profile changes, new wall postings, new pictures, or new link to stream video from around the world, to name a few." Language learners can like pages and add friends for English learning purposes, while at the same time maintain their social circle.

### **Pages**

Facebook also offers a kind of profile that users can create about their favorite things or people, and other users can interact in this page by making comments, sharing ideas and expressing satisfaction by the use of the option "like". Everything that is updated in a page appears in a user's timeline, if he or she wants. An example of page is

“Practice English” which has more than 43 thousand “likes” and everyday updates interesting phrases and jokes in English.

The exchange of information enabled by the Page section of Facebook can be related to the Communicative approach since it enables L2 learners to have meaningful communicative interactions with highly competent speakers of the language. There are also websites that provided suggestions for those who want to use Facebook for language learning. One such page (ARELI, 2012) offers the following suggestions:

Liking fan pages related to languages will show on your news feed all their status updates and activities. Try to find those who write and interact in a different language and not in yours so that you get the chance to have a conversation and actually use everything you are learning. Types of fan pages: dictionaries language pages (just type the language you are interested in on the search field and check out all the options it will provide) and language schools (sometimes they post activities or interesting videos plus you’ll get to know when to apply for their courses). (ARELI, 2012, Available at: [www.lexiophiles.com/english/how-to-use-facebook-to-learn-languages](http://www.lexiophiles.com/english/how-to-use-facebook-to-learn-languages))

## **Groups**

Facebook also allows users to create groups to exchange information addressing any topic. Groups can be set to private or public status and there are many existent groups about learning English where users can share interests. There are also groups about artists, series, films, books where users are free to join discussions on any topic.

A study carried out by Wu & Hsu (2011) with Taiwanese college students who took part in a Facebook community of interest (CoI) which had English as the target language suggested that “participants contributed and engaged in the interactions with more “meaningful” inputs” (2011, p. 05). They also concluded that through the interactions with their Facebook friends in the target language (English), students were able to learn new words, build confidence, increase their motivation and positive attitude toward language learning.

Facebook enables L2 students to join interest groups which have English as a target language and therefore offer the chance to discuss and practice English with users who share the same interests and language. Blattner and Fiori (2009, p.03) say that

“[...] joining *Groups* in which users share similar interests is another feature that is extremely popular on this Social Network Community (SNC) and it is the pedagogical potentials [...]”

## Applications

Facebook also offers applications with useful games and news pages to practice English. An example of game is the *Scrabble*<sup>3</sup> where players have to form English words and scores according to each one. A player can chose a friend to play or he or she can chose the option “random opponent” and play with any user, even a foreigner or native speaker of English.

Another example is the game *SongPop*<sup>4</sup> where a player has to guess a song’s name and can also play with foreigners and native speakers. Most of the songs are in English and according to Kamel (1997, p. 227) “song-based language teaching tasks are effective.”

Another example of Facebook application which can be used to foster L2 is the news application where users can read about news in newspapers such as The Guardian available online. According to Windham (2005 cited in BLATTNER and FIORI, 2009, p. 01) “*high tech* applications (i.e.: synchronous chat, discussion forums, social networking websites) have transformed the way students approach, manage and complete assignments.” Furthermore, Blattner and Fiori (2009, p. 03) state that “these applications join students to each other, and faculty to students, in an unprecedented way.”

We can conclude that by having access to these applications a student can practice English by making use of new words, reading in the target language and also practicing writing and listening skills in an authentic and meaningful way.

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<sup>3</sup> Scrabble is a word game in which two to four players score points by forming words from individual lettered tiles on a game board marked with a 15×15 grid. The words are formed across and down in crossword fashion and must appear in a standard dictionary.

<sup>4</sup> Song Pop is a music game borrowing a concept from name that tune users must guess the song in as little time as possible. This site/app helps users to practice all the songs found on Songpop and keep them posted on updates.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the potential of a social network, Facebook, as a tool for L2 practice. With that aim, some features of Facebook were analyzed and contrasted with theories and notions of second language acquisition. Data analysis suggests that Facebook offers many features that are aligned with theories of L2 learning and that can be incorporated in blended methodologies of L2 teaching or used as a complement to traditional methodologies to increase contact with the target language and opportunities for meaningful interactions in the L2.

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