

WhatsApp and the Teaching of English: Exploring the Scope of Personal and Technological Frontiers in Teacher-Student Technological Environments

Francisco José Francisco Carrera
Trans-REAL Lab, Universidad de Valladolid

Is it possible to use WhatsApp effectively within college language learning contexts? The present research starts from the question above in order to explore if such a powerful communicative tool can reach our students without trespassing some controversial frontiers. It is important to pay attention to “how close we can get” within their personal frontiers since instant messaging can be rather personal and intense these days due to the continuous presence of mobile phones in our everyday life. I consider my students’ stated opinions and offer a few hints on the correct use of WhatsApp in formal teaching contexts.

Keywords: Infocination, instant communication, frontiers, teacher-student relationship, ontology.

Introduction

The present paper was born out of a major cause for preoccupation: How can a sound relationship between students and teachers can be under assault these hyper-technological days? As a matter of fact, I tried to get even further by “carefully assaulting” my students’ privacy in order to improve their level of English along with their interest about the topic. To do so, I wondered about a powerful medium that allowed me to reach my students properly; after much thought, it seemed clear to me that there is no other medium more powerful than WhatsApp nowadays: it is instant, it can offer a dose of emotional overload and it is phone-related, which implies a very personal relation for the user and some rich ontological connotations as far as the mobile phone is concerned (Ferraris, 2008).

This is due, of course, to the space mobile technology occupies in our lives, both in the personal and professional scopes. While we are developing a very close relationship with devices such as computers, mobile phones, and tablets, it seems that smartphones have become more and more the center of the technological world around us. We use them at home, at work, while shopping or having a coffee with friends, or even while idly having a walk in the field (providing there is coverage there, of course). They may not have become a part of our body yet, but we try not to get too far away from their presence. Just think about the panic we experience when we are unsure about their whereabouts. The social impact of this psychological malaise of our times is known as nomophobia, the panic attack we may experience when we are without our mobile phones. And what about the soothing feeling of relief when we locate them again after these bleak moments of despair and anguish; when we get to repossess our precious treasure that allows us to be forever connected to the outer world out there, to belong to our digital tribes again? All these issues are, in a way, related to a sense of “screenization” from our

physical world, a term by Esquirol (2015) to refer to the fact that we become isolated from the real world by the superposition of technological devices and their screens; something coming of age so quickly and subtly, we got so used to be surrounded by monitor screens that we now would feel rather odd if those screens were to be erased from our everyday life routines.

Technology is here to stay, as it has always been with the human race from its inception. While this innovation offers us new ways to grow we have to be careful because a powerful enough technology can unsettle other ontological values and ways to be in the world which are essential for our species and our planet. Morozov (2015) has already warn us about the dangers of a society becoming more and more optimistic about certain kinds of internet centrism. Needless to say we have to be careful, especially in Education. The message is important. How we transmit it is a question to be pondered as well. Therefore, it the margins of what is said are essential, as are the empty spaces surrounding the information items we need to share with our students or colleagues, in classes, papers or conferences. It is a complex time, so complex because never in the history of men was reaching and sharing information so fast and easy. Today's education world implies a sound and efficient handling of the technologies of information; new software appears in our teaching lives academic course after academic course in a non-stop motion; therefore, we should pause for a while every now and then in this ever-changing flow in order to focus on the important things in our profession: how can we make the best of the technological world around us to help our students to grow and learn and at the same time be human beings with satisfying lives? With all these ideas in mind, I will proceed to take a deeper look at some of the issues raised here.

Research Design

The constant evolution of instant messaging technologies is one of the strands Education will definitely have to explore in the near future. With this challenge in mind I will proceed to explain the steps I took to be able to get a better understanding of the medium and the frontiers involved in this typology of communication. The time has come for educators to show a high degree of pedagogical rationality (Cebrián, 2003) in relation to the use of technological devices within educative contexts, something I shall relate to the classical concept of *phronesis* in the following pages.

Background

To explore these issues, I carried out my research with a group of students registered in one of the courses I usually teach: “Aprendizaje temprano de la lengua extranjera - Inglés”. The project will take three years for its total completion in order to see its evolution. The data presented here belongs to the first year: 2016-17. This course is an essential part of the syllabus of “Educación Infantil”, offered in the Faculty of Education in Soria (Universidad de Valladolid, Spain).

Some background comments will be useful to understand the context: a) Soria is one of the smallest cities of Spain and this reality accounts for a not widely spread culture of speaking English (or other foreign languages for that matter); the city is in some ways isolated from other bigger centers of population as well; b) while

globalization and the internet have changed the landscape in the last 20 years, it still bears some influence in the standardization of using English; c) “Educación Infantil” in Spain covers the teaching needs of children aged from 3 to 6 and so far is not extremely concerned with the teaching of English in general. This accounts for a dangerous idea that has been gaining ground in the minds of future teachers who are to work in this educational period: English is not as important for them as for their future colleagues and fellow students in the Faculty of Education (those enrolled in the Primary Education degree); d) participants were a medium-sized group of 36 students; the course is compulsory for all the students wishing to get the degree in “Educación Infantil”. This is important because not many of them are intrinsically interested in the English language; extrinsically, they seemed not to be as pressured as their fellow students in Primary Education. All the students were informed that they were taking part in a research activity and the results gathered could be presented in academic journals and conventions.

The project

For the duration of the course (4 months in the academic course 2016-2017, from February to May), I would send at least a daily WhatsApp to my students. I did not create a group for the reception of the messages; I considered that this could be too “risky” since I would have to ask all my students for their personal phone number. However, I selected a person to be the central receptor who would send the messages to the rest of the class. Therefore, every single day I proceeded to send a minimum of one message and a maximum of 10. Those messages presented: a) general vocabulary; b) teaching vocabulary; c) grammar issues; d) news concerning technological environments; e) news concerning teaching and education and f) jokes. Most of the messages consisted of just pictures.

Instruments

The instruments for gathering the data consisted of a) group discussions with the students and b) a final short inquiry with both open and closed questions. Group discussions seemed quite useful “to create the right conditions” (Bohnsack, 2004, p. 219) to understand some important issues. This is a wonderful way as well to create a context in which I could get closer to the students, who usually open their hearts more freely in this kind of protective environment. The final inquiry was anonymous because I wanted them to feel free enough to provide their answers. These were the questions posed:

1. What is your opinion about the experience of receiving WhatsApps as part of the “Aprendizaje Temprano de la Lengua Extranjera - Inglés” course?
2. The use of WhatsApp has been (circle the correct option for you):
 - a) Insufficient
 - b) Adequate
 - c) Excessive
3. How do you feel about the fact of receiving studying material in a private and personal medium such as your mobile phone?
4. Define the experience with a single word.

5. How could the experience be improved for future courses?

Discussion

Before we proceed, it would be helpful to bear this key-idea in mind: “Smartphones, for many of us, have indeed become an extension of ourselves - something like a digital appendage. It is that level of interconnection that has made the smartphone such a potential game-changers in education” (Godwin-Jones, 2017, p. 4). This is an essential point indeed and we, as teachers, have to play our cards with care and wisdom. Therefore, these are the most important issues I came upon after analyzing the results of the group discussions and the inquiries:

a) Most of the students felt overwhelmed. It was not only that receiving messages on the weekend felt rather awkward for them but also those working days when I decided to storm their phones with up to 10 messages were too much to handle. This of course raises the question of “how much is enough” in education, and that is why I defend a *phronetic* view of education and most of the professions dealing with other human beings (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012). *Phronesis* should be understood as practical wisdom in the way Beuchot (2009) has discussed the term ever since Aristotle used it and later on was brought back to life in the twentieth century by the German Philosopher H. G. Gadamer in his master work *Truth and Method*.

b) Most of the students, despite being overwhelmed, felt that the experience was worthwhile. They felt that the teacher cared a lot about their education and formation as future English teachers. This fact helped them in many ways to accept the constant message bombardment every single day of the week. They thought it was for a better good.

c) Vocabulary is a tricky issue. One of the weakest points of the students was vocabulary and therefore I tried to cover that gap sending many vocabulary items. They were all happy about it but, every now and then, I checked if they had learnt the vocabulary; that was not the case. They usually replied that although it was significant for them, they didn't put more time in memorizing the new words even though they knew it was something important for a language teacher.

d) I found out that, as expected, humor always saves the day. Again, this is something we, human beings, should never forget. Teachers' ability to be funnily serious is priceless. After some “you need to study this hard” messages, I used to send a light joke cartoon or some kind, related if possible to education, and many of the students told me those were the messages they tend to remember the best. This seems self-explanatory and I won't delve any further into it to find any hidden meaning.

Changes for Next Academic Course

Per the results, I intend to modify some of the actions planned for the course 2017-18, the 2nd year in the research plan. To begin with, I will not send any notifications during the weekends. This was the most controversial issue in the first analysis. It is important as well to work in a proper selection of the materials. It seems that, carried out by my “teaching passion”, I sent too many messages and did not reflect well enough on their nature. A better design in this respect is requested. This means that it is extremely important to choose the right materials when using powerful informative tools, otherwise an overload of information can lead to a poor learning experience for students. Once I compare the results from the first two years, I will try to prepare the final plan for the third year, which I expect to discuss and present in the future. This should lead this research to an end, at least in a prospective stage. Having gathered data and experiences three years in a row should provide enough “food for thought” to reflect on the use of WhatsApp in formal education.

Conclusion

This work is really a reflection on frontiers in education (frontiers within frontiers, by the way, physical and psychological ones); on trespassing limits to find a common ground where teachers and students could become one without losing their identities and differences. A teacher needs to know when to get closer to the students, but also when to move away from them, leaving enough room for things to happen without his or her interference (Biesta, 2012). The use of technology in the classroom, far from a battle between technophiles and technophobes (Lewin, 2016) has transcended this stage. At the same time, the human touch has to be more present than ever in our technological contact with students. These days, information gets piled up in our lives, getting too close to a constant state of *infoxication*; that is, why the messages are as important as the spaces among them. In a way, Lewin (2014) was definitely pointing out something crucial in education when he vowed for an effort to regain some silence back in our classrooms, to provide students with enough room for attention and contemplation. This will help us in the crossing of pedagogical frontiers. This and a *phronetic* view on education. The teacher has to read the class with care. The teacher becomes in the end a sort of meta-interpreter (Francisco & García, 2018) since it is his or her function to be aware of the many different planes of meaning interacting simultaneously in education: the whole group, the subgroups created among the students, the students individually, and beyond that he or she has to be able to see himself or herself in and out of the group. Thus, WhatsApp and mobile phone technology give us a wonderful environment to reach a better understanding of the important things in education. When we carefully approach human frontiers in order to share something we should do our best to reach the others respectfully without losing ourselves in the process. That is to say, learning to be the others without stopping to be oneself. If technology marches hand in hand with practical wisdom, education will no doubt reap a fine harvest in the future to come.

References

- Beuchot, M. (2009). *Tratado de hermenéutica analógica: Hacia un nuevo modelo de interpretación*. México, D. C.: Ítaca.
- Biesta, G. (2012). No education without hesitation: Exploring the limits of educational relations. *Philosophy of Education*, 2012, 1-13. Retrieved from <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/artide/view/3594/1215>
- Bohnsack, (2004). Group discussion and focus group. In Flick, Kardoff & Steinke (eds.). *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Cebrián, M. (2003). *Enseñanza virtual para la innovación universitaria*. Madrid: Narcea.
- Esquirol, J. M. (2015). *La resistencia íntima. Ensayo de una filosofía de la proximidad*. Barcelona: Acontilado.
- Ferraris, M. (2008). *¿Dónde estás? Ontología del teléfono móvil*. Barcelona: Marbot Ediciones.
- Francisco, F. J. & García, R. El docente como metahermeneuta: Hacia una phronesis didáctico-interpretativa en la profesión educativa. In *An Approach to Society and Education from Hermeneutics*. Soria: Ceasga.
- Kinsella, E. A. & Pitman, A. (eds.). (2012). *Phronesis as professional knowledge. Practical wisdom in the professions*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2017). Smartphones and language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 21(2), 3-17. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/issues/june2017/emerging.pdf>
- Lewin, D. (2014). Behold: Silence and attention in education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48(3), 356-369.
- Lewin, D. (2016). The pharmakon of educational technology: The disruptive power of attention in education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 35, 251-265.
- Morozov, E. (2015). *La locura del solucionismo tecnológico*. Madrid: Katz Editores.