



# Learning English With a Social Networking Site: Exploring the Use of the Ning Site by Foreign Language Learners\*



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## Resumen

Este artículo describe un estudio piloto llevado a cabo con estudiantes de Inglés 5 (nivel B+) en la Universidad de Valencia, la cual incorporó una red social para estudiar inglés fuera del horario lectivo. La herramienta seleccionada fue la web Ning, porque se centraba en el grupo y ofrecía toda una serie de herramientas interesantes – blogs, chats and foros de discusión – que tenían potencial para el aprendizaje del inglés. Los resultados indican que el uso del Ning en combinación con el contacto cara a cara contribuyó a la comunicación y la discusión en inglés y sirvió para estimular la colaboración de los estudiantes y la motivación a participar. Los miembros del Ning también cumplieron los objetivos propuestos para las herramientas seleccionadas al mismo tiempo que encontraron otros usos no planificados y, por tanto, tomaron las herramientas y las adaptaron a sus propias necesidades. Los resultados de este estudio tienen implicaciones para la enseñanza ya que el Ning sirve para promover el uso del inglés en el aula.

**Palabras clave:** web Ning, Web 2.0, redes sociales, aprender inglés, tecnologías de la información y la comunicación

## Resum

Aquest article descriu un estudi pilot dut a terme amb estudiants d'Inglés 5 (nivell B+) en la Universitat de València, la qual va incorporar una xarxa social per a estudiar anglès fóra de l'horari lectiu. L'eina seleccionada va ser la web Ning, perquè se centrava en el grup i ofería tot un seguit de eines interessants – blogs, xats i fòrums de discussió – que tenien potencial per a l'aprenentatge de l'anglès. Els resultats indiquen que l'ús del Ning en combinació amb el contacte cara a cara va contribuir a la comunicació i la discussió en anglès i va servir per a estimular la col·laboració dels estudiants i la motivació a participar. Els membres del Ning també van complir els objectius proposats per a les eines seleccionades al mateix temps que van trobar altres usos no planificats i, per tant, van prendre les eines i les van adaptar a les seues pròpies necessitats. Els resultats d'aquest estudi tenen implicacions per a l'ensenyament ja que el Ning serveix per a promoure l'ús de l'anglès en l'aula.

**Paraules clau:** iweb Ning, Web 2.0, xarxes socials, aprendre anglès, tecnologies de la informació i la comunicació

## Abstract

The present article describes the pilot study undertaken with students of English 5 (B+ level) at the University of Valencia, who incorporated a social-networking site for learning English outside class time. The tool selected was the Ning site, because it was group-centered and it further offered a variety of interesting tools – blogs, chats and discussion forums – that had potential for learning English. The results indicate that the use of Ning combined with face-to-face meetings favored communication and discussion in English and encouraged the students' involvement and motivation to participate. The Ning members also met the goals intended for the tools selected and found other unintended uses and, therefore, they appropriated the tools and tailored them to their own needs. The results of this study have implications for teaching, as the Ning has been found to have a place within the English classroom to promote further practice in English.

**Key words:** Ning site, Web 2.0, social networking sites, learning English, ICTs

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## 1. Introduction

With the advent of social networking sites, video streaming, blogging, podcasts, and wikis, today's classrooms have entered a revolution that has technology at its core. They are known as Web 2.0 technologies, which are defined as "applications and services that facilitate collective action and social interaction online with rich exchange of multimedia information and evolution of aggregate knowledge" (Parameswaran and Whinston, 2007: 762). Social networking sites allow users to create user-generated content that is highly dynamic and changeable and is mainly characterized by the emphasis on community and collaboration (Arnold and Paulus, 2010: 188). Indeed, they often contain individual profile pages that help identify the author of the post and tools, such as blogs, chats and discussion forums that enhance cooperation between peers. Web 2.0 technologies (or social software tools) also encourage student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction outside the classroom, as well as other outside connections beyond the educational setting, which is especially valuable in foreign language learning where exposure to the target language is often limited. Content is shared with other users, who are encouraged to participate actively, since "participants are not simply passive consumers, but active users" (Bruns, 2008: 23). Some well-known social networking sites are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, SlideShare and Flickr and social bookmarking sites, such as Delicious, all of which provide a vehicle for collaboration for educational and non-educational purposes worldwide.

Research on the educational potential of social networking sites is still in its infancy, although a few studies (Arnold and Paulus, 2010; Brady *et al.*, 2010; Blattner and Fiori, 2009; Minocha, 2009; University of Minnesota, 2008) have highlighted benefits derived from the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies through a social networking site, such as Facebook, Ning, Twitter, MySpace, blogs or wikis. For example, Facebook has been found to promote socio-pragmatic competence (Blattner and Fiori, 2009) and to facilitate problem-solving and peer support (Minocha, 2009: 253) and the Ning site, to encourage student engagement, learning ownership and collaboration with students and professionals (Brady *et al.*, 2010: 156). Twitter has been concluded to facilitate better understanding of the students' needs, which results in immediate response to the students' queries without a need for a formal meeting (Minocha, 2009: 251), and MySpace, to assist in creating a positive attitude towards technology, content revision and content tailored to the students' needs (University of Minnesota, 2008). Finally, blogs and wikis have been found to help in student socialization, collaborative learning, teamwork and peer-to-peer support and feedback and, thus, they benefit students through idea sharing, which helps in understanding course concepts (Minocha, 2009: 252-3). Further advantages derived from the use of social networking sites include a sense of achievement and encouraging improvement, as the writing that is carried out is directed at an audience (Minocha, 2009: 253-4). More-

over, online tools are utilized for uses they were not primarily intended for, since students often appropriate sites to meet their needs and "how they do so may surprise us as educators" (Arnold and Paulus, 2010: 195). However, just as important is the belief that using Web 2.0 technology in the classroom has drawbacks and potential threats that should be considered, including workload issues (Pennock-Speck, 2009), because students and educators often feel that social software poses an additional workload; limitations on the quality of interaction, due to lack of experience in the use of the applications; and uncertainty about ownership and assessment issues, because content in social software tools is created collaboratively and, therefore, educators are also uncertain about how to assess the work (Schroeder *et al.*, 2010: 165-6).

In the present study we present the results obtained after using the Ning site with an English 5 classroom (B2+ level<sup>1</sup>) at the University of Valencia during the 2011-2012 academic year. We are particularly interested in finding out answers to the following research questions: (a) What was the student use of the Ning site? and (b) How well did the site help the lecturer to achieve the course goals?

To answer these questions we have used the information provided by the Ning site, the instructor's observations, private conversation with eight students and interviews with two of them, who volunteered to take part in the study. The results of the study are intended to contribute to our understanding of how social networking sites outside traditional classroom time can be used to support teaching. It is our belief that electronic communication "increases learners' opportunities to use the L2 creatively, to improve their interactional skills and their L2 abilities, and to establish an interactional community that facilitates a free flow of ideas in a nonthreatening learning context" (Abrams, 2006: 198). Investigating the student use of the Ning site can shed some light into how this happens.

## 2. CMC and foreign language learning

In the field of foreign language learning, a growing number of studies (Arnold and Paulus, 2010; Stevenson and Liu, 2010; Abrams, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2005) are investigating the use of online social networks for language learning purposes. Many studies testify to the growing importance of Web 2.0 tools for language learning, since they "may provide *real-world* listening and speaking skills not provided by static Web 1.0 learning tools" (Stevenson and Liu, 2010: 235). For example, Godwin-Jones (2005: 19-20) points out that some Web 2.0 tools are being used within the second language classroom, such as instant messaging tools for text-based interaction with native speakers and downloadable podcasts to help students learn pronunciation skills, review vocabulary and instructors' comments on assignments and exams. In addition, the widespread popularity of videogames among youngsters and the observation that web-based videogaming and fan sites provide young people with a space for peer-to-peer learning of writing has led some language instructors to use those sites for peer review of writing and *giving directions* activities. Abrams

<sup>1</sup> B2+ corresponds to a consolidated B2 level and, therefore, it is aimed at reinforcing the B2 level. There are two reasons why such terminology has been taken up rather than the one proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: (1) the University of Valencia distinguishes the levels A1+, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, C1, C1+ and C2 corresponding to English Language 1-8; therefore, the consolidated levels B1+, B2+ and C1+ are an attempt to adequate the English levels to the number of English courses, and (2) students need some time to really acquire a given level of English for both the productive and receptive skills (Spanish Universities usually consider one academic year to do so).

(2006: 197) enumerates further benefits for L2 students derived from the use of CMC technologies, including: (1) collaborative learning, (2) meaningful language use, (3) extended language practice, (4) use of multiple participant roles and subsequent discourse roles/discourse functions, (5) increased motivation, and (6) less reliance on students' L1 as a compensatory communication strategy. In addition, students' language in CMC "[is] both more formal and more complex than [during] the face-to-face discussion" (Warschauer, 1996: 21), students have a more positive attitude to writing than their peers participating in an oral classroom (a non-CMC course) and they outperform them on writing scores: "the mean score in the oral class *decreased* significantly at the end of the fifteen weeks while the mean of the computer-assisted class *increased* significantly [emphases in original]" (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996: 496).

The use of social networking sites has also changed teachers' and students' roles: teachers have now taken on a secondary role, while students are responsible for their own learning. This means that "lecturers are already not accepting all responsibility for content and accept sharing their authority; at the same time, this paradigm change also means that students are more active and have more confidence in their capabilities" [our translation] (Audet, 2010: 77). The teacher will only intervene to set up a previous teaching organization and structuring or when his/her help is needed. This results in more interaction, collaboration, shared views and, most importantly, in an increase of the student's autonomy and responsibility (Panckhurst and Marsh, 2011: 245).

A few studies (Arnold and Paulus, 2010, Brady *et al.*, 2010, Panckhurst and Marsh, 2011) have commented on the educational benefits of using Ning for teaching and learning as compared to traditional face-to-face courses. Some students in Brady *et al.*'s (2010: 156) study indicated that there were increasing levels of collaboration between students using the Ning site, since it offered "convenience and ability to reflect on classmates' responses", more exchange of information and differing viewpoints. The technical capabilities of the Ning site to upload videos, images and files also helped students to expand and improve their postings. As Panckhurst and Marsh (2011: 244) explained it: "The page layout and the easily identifiable interfaces are not an ingenious trick; they are absolutely crucial to encourage students' participation" [our translation]. In Arnold and Paulus's (2010) study, the profile pages of Ning were used to personalize the information by using photos, backgrounds and formats of the students' own choice. Also, friending and wall posts were used to communicate either in private or public; finally, the discussion forums between instructor-student-student served to exchange files and the blog posts to write journals or do some free writing. Despite the positive aspects of the Ning site commonly pointed out, there are also drawbacks, such as the amount of time needed to stay current in the network, access restrictions (Brady *et al.*, 2010: 156), advertisements on the right side bar, limited font and color options, network slowdowns, inefficient interface for searching past blog posts, among others (Rice and Rooks, 2009: 67).

Given the potential of CMC for L2 language instruction, teachers should take into account some pedagogical considerations for appropriate CMC implementation. Such consid-

erations affect task and assignment design, assessment and teacher participation in CMC sessions (Abrams, 2006: 189). According to Abrams (2006: 197), when designing CMC tasks the L2 instructor should take into account some considerations: (1) s/he should consider what the intended learning outcome is and design tasks that have a specific purpose for language and content goals, (2) s/he can use different groups of students with authentic and pedagogical purposes, (3) s/he can alternate his/her control with more student control, (4) s/he can introduce CMC to the beginning of L2 classes, (5) s/he should offer opportunities for more creative uses of CMC; (6) and s/he should clearly indicate what the purpose of the task is and what aspects students should learn.

### 3. A pilot study for the use of Ning in the English 5 classroom (B2+ Level)

Within our 4-year degree program English 5 is a compulsory subject that students take in the first semester of their 3rd year at University. The program is designed for people who will use their knowledge of English in various fields including teaching and translation. It also offers different M.A. programs, one of which is an M.A. for teaching English in Secondary Education and an M.A. in Translation.

A total of 12 Spanish students and a lecturer participated in the Ning site. Participating was not compulsory, but students obtained credit for taking part (one extra point) and, therefore, were motivated to be Ning members. They were all studying the degree of Traducción y Mediación Interlingüística in English at the University of Valencia. These students usually have a good academic level, as the grade required for studying the degree in the 2011-2012 academic year suggests (over 11 out of 14)<sup>2</sup>. All of them had studied English since their schooling years, although some acknowledged having studied English in private classes. Also, all had passed English 4 and, therefore, had an intermediate level of English. Their mean age was 22.3 years, most of whom were women (n=9 or 75%). No gender-based differences were observed between the participants in their English level.

A social-networking site was incorporated into the teaching of English 5 motivated by the following decisions: (1) Technology is the language our students speak; therefore, using technology in the classroom was a way of exploiting it for their own benefit. (2) Since our students have limited contact with English, technology could be used to offer them more opportunities to improve their communication skills. (3) The Internet offers materials that our students could take advantage of.

Although there exist a variety of social networking sites available for potential users, not many offered the features the instructor was looking for. For example, Facebook is individual-based; that is, the user creates an individual profile and then s/he can add friends, join groups, make comments, add photos and videos and participate in chats. The intention was however to create a group-centered social-networking site; that is, the lecturer created a site for a group and invited the students to join in. Therefore, the Ning site was chosen because it was group-centered and it further offered a variety of interesting tools –blogs, chats and discussion forums–

<sup>2</sup> ABC. Más de 1.300 plazas quedan vacantes para septiembre en las universidades públicas valencianas. 25/07/2011. <http://www.abc.es/abcnclase-valencia/detalleNoticia.aspx?idArticulo=112>.



Figure 1. The Ning site.

that had potential for learning English and made it a suitable tool for the lecturer's purposes (see Figure 1).

To answer the first research question *What was the student use of the Ning site?*, we examined how the members had used the different tools of the site. After registering, a personal page was available for each individual user. To become a member of the group the students had to respond to some profile questions determined by the site's administrator. These were then visible only to members: name, age, city, country, hobbies and Facebook user name. The students were also asked to add a photograph so as to promote a feeling of community; they were encouraged to become familiar with the site and to experiment with the different tools. Ten out of the twelve participants added a photo and changed the format of their profiles. The majority also used *friending* to add new friends and exchange private messages and wall posts to exchange public ones, that is, messages visible to all members of the social network.

The main page included the following elements: Course description, text boxes, RSS, photographs of the members, forum, videos, information about the creator of the Ning site, messaging, a link to an educational site and latest activity updates, all of which provided an overall view of the activities the site members could participate in. The text boxes were used for providing information about English learning pages, videos related to a discussion topic and famous sayings. RSS provided Spanish news in English, National Geographic news and BBC world news and, therefore,

the students were encouraged to be in touch with English by using authentic and ready-made materials for foreign language learners. The messages and forums were used for communication and discussion purposes between the Ning members. No specific purpose was given to the educational site and the latest activity tool, that is, it was not expected that the students used them for learning English.

Student-to-student-to-lecturer discussions mostly took place in the discussion forums. The lecturer would suggest a topic for discussion related to the unit studied in class and would add photographs or a video that supported class discussion. The students would respond by writing a story or a description and the lecturer would then reply by giving them positive comments and feedback for improvement. The students could also suggest topics for discussion and some of them did, which shows their involvement with the class activities. Five forums were created by the instructor and the class made a total of 46 posts (see Table 1) and four were created by the students, who made 29 posts in total (see Table 2). The number of posts per task reveals that the students increased the number of their postings from the earlier lecturer's tasks to the final ones, as they became engaged with the online activities and felt more motivated to participate. The student-initiated tasks were also popular between the students. Raúl<sup>4</sup> commented that he felt thrilled when his postings were commented on by other students or the lecturer: "I felt so excited when I got replies to my postings .... I didn't feel I was talking to a wall, as I had feared."

Wall posts were also heavily used, with 63 posts made during the semester. They helped students to keep in touch with the lecturer and students, to comment on class assignments and to ask for information when they had missed a class. Raúl made the following comment: "I have seen it [the

Task description	# posts
200 countries, 200 years, 4 minutes	5
Happy Thanksgiving, y'all	8
Recommended reading	6
It's Christmas time. Time for happiness?	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

Table 2. Students' tasks.

Task description	# posts
Space, an abstract concept. In what kind of "space" do you feel comfortable? Whether you are thinking of your (ideal) home, a space where you can enjoy whatever feeling that emotion gives rise to ... Tell us a bit about your special spaces. (The activity also included the video "Encourage Tate Modern" to encourage class discussion).	4
What book has left a big impression on you? Try to remember the book you loved as a child or as an adolescent and why. Also, try to remember the story that has stayed in your memory for a long time and that you will never forget. Does this story remind you of anything?	8
Where humans and animals converge. Tell a story of an animal making something extraordinary, such as saving a human life.(Some photographs of animals have been included)	9
Write a review of a restaurant. Talk about location, atmosphere, food and price. Give your personal opinion of the restaurant. (Some photographs of restaurants have been included)	11
Tell how you met someone important in your life. Why was s/he important for you? Where did you meet him/her? Was there anything unusual in the way you met? (A video about meeting people was part of the task)	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>

Table 1. Lecturer's tasks.

<sup>4</sup> The names are pseudonyms.



Ning] as a way of getting in touch with the lecturer and the students outside class time. [...] It is also a very useful tool for getting to know people.” Similarly, the video section was very much used. The instructor often uploaded videos to initiate a discussion related to the current class unit, encouraged students to watch them and to make comments. The students were also able to upload videos that added further class discussion. A total of 22 videos were uploaded, which generated 35 comments. The popularity of the videos lay in the fact that they were felt to be entertaining and required less concentration than texts. Ning was therefore thought to be a useful instrument to promote further contact with English outside class time and as a way to improve it:

“I think it is a good way of being in contact with English. The moment you log in you need to change automatically ... it was a change into English and everything [was] in English”. (Raúl)

“Using Ning outside the classroom offers the opportunity to do activities outside class time ... activities that are not carried out during a regular class”. (Raúl)

“With a social networking site you ... are in a more relaxing atmosphere ... have more time to think of your English, to revise what you’ve written and to edit it. Sometimes .... it happened to me that I posted a message and two hours later I eliminated it and rewrote it again. You ... also have a lot of resources: forums, exercises, questionnaires ...”. (Eva)

One common activity between the students was reading, but not actually responding to the discussions and, therefore, for some authors, students “benefit relatively little from this more passive interaction” (Beaudoin, 2002: 148). Indeed, the majority of students took some time until they participated actively (see Table 1). We believe however that this type of invisible interaction – also called lurking – supported community building and ultimately promoted learning, as private conversations with the students revealed that they read posted messages and returned to earlier ideas to form an overall opinion of the issue being discussed. As Eva indicated: “I read Sergio’s comments a lot ... I like the way he talks very much ... It is true that I read a lot more than I write because I’m also a bit lazy ....” Therefore, “lurking is not, as

sometimes implied, an activity of the uninvolved and disengaged” and lurkers often “benefit from others’ ideas, insights and questions” (Dennen, 2008: 1631-2).

Despite the positive results derived from the use of Ning, the present study also concludes that the site also has drawbacks, such as less familiarity with the site layout and, therefore, the Ning members took some time to learn about its tools; common use of other social networking sites, which are, therefore, more familiar to the members; and excessive information on the main page of the site, which did not help ease of use.

To answer the second research question *How well did the site help the lecturer to achieve the course goals?*, we observed how the Ning site suited the course’s needs. Over the course of the year the site was found to be very reliable, since the lecturer and students did not experience any major technical problems. Registering and designing the site was easy and the students also found that, after some practice, the site layout was quite simple and straightforward. Also, the instructor was able to easily customize the tabs and the content of the site as well as add posts for the students to use and, therefore, Ning suited the class’s needs. All Ning tools were employed except for two: chats and Google docs, the former because the class met face-to-face often and, therefore, the instructor felt it would be unnatural to discuss issues that could be talked about in class, and the latter because Ning was not thought to be an information resource for students.

The Ning site supported the tasks intended for the students to complete. Indeed, the main page showed the activities the participants had to be involved with (i.e. forums, videos and sites for learning English). The goals intended for some activities –text boxes, RSS and videos– were met; however, other unintended uses were also found and, thus, “Ning, as a tool, provided students with the opportunity to take ownership in their learning while also allowing students to personalize it to their needs” (Brady *et al.*, 2010: 156) (see Table 3). The text boxes tool of Ning was meant to be a repository of web pages for learning English and videos supporting discussion in the discussion forum. The students did not report any further uses for text boxes. In the discussion forums the students reflected on and wrote about the topics suggested for debate. The discussions were effective, since they provided the students with opportunities for meaningful language use and collaborative learning. Even the most

Tools	Planned uses	Unplanned uses
<i>Text boxes</i>	Repository of English learning webpages and videos for discussion.	None
<i>Discussion forums</i>	Reflection about the topics posed by the instructor or the students.	Lurking
<i>Wall posts</i>	No specific use	Questions about class activities and homework, community building
<i>RSS</i>	Updated news in English that provided further practice for students.	None
<i>Videos</i>	Reflection about the topics posed by the instructor or the students.	None
<i>Blogs</i>	No specific use	Community building, lurking
<i>Individual profile pages and friending</i>	No specific use	Community building
<i>Experiment of the week</i>	No specific use	Learning how to do a do-it-yourself activity
<i>Activity updates</i>	No specific use	None

Table 3. Planned and unplanned uses of the Ning tools.

reserved students in class participated and, therefore, the Ning site was a suitable tool for all students, who also used it for lurking their mates' interactions. Wall posts were not given any specific uses; however, the Ning members regularly made wall postings including reflections and comments about class activities and for informal conversations and, therefore, they fostered a sense of community not intended by the lecturer. With the RSS tool the students received updated news in English that they could resort to so as to obtain further practice in the English language. There is no evidence that the Ning members found any unintended uses. The video feature was also proposed for the participants to reflect on the topics suggested by the instructor or the students and they did not use it for other purposes. Finally, the blogs, profile pages, friending, the experiment of the week and the latest activity tool had no specific purposes; however, some students acknowledged that reading their peers' blogs encouraged them to participate in the discussions. Also, the profile pages and the friending tool helped learners to feel that they belonged to a community: "You see the people and you know who you are talking to ..." (Raúl). One student also used the experiment of the week in an educational site to learn a do-it-yourself activity which was explained in English, while the instructor had even considered deleting it, if allowed by the site, and include other more useful activities. We conclude therefore that "educational technology is most effective when students make it their own and initiate some use by themselves" (Arnold and Paulus, 2010: 194).

#### 4. Conclusions

The present study describes the use of the Ning site with a group of English 5 students at the University of Valencia during the 2011-2012 academic year and the results obtained. Using Ning with a small group with frequent face-to-face meetings has been found to favor communication and discussion in English between students, to encourage involvement with class activities and motivation to participate in the site. Indeed, the participants in this study increased the number of their postings from the earlier instructor-initiated tasks to the final ones and they also created their own tasks. Ning was also found to support the goals intended for the tools selected – text boxes, discussion forums, RSS and videos – although some (i.e. wall posts, blogs, profile pages, friending and the experiment of the week) had unintended goals for use within this study. The Ning participants met the goals planned for the tools and found other unplanned uses and, therefore, they appropriated the tools and used them according to their own needs. Also, for a small class that met face-to-face regularly, the Ning site contributed to extending the original physical class into an online group that collaborated as a community.

Our findings have implications for teaching English using an online site. The results indicate that Ning is a useful tool that can find a place within the English classroom to promote further practice in English. Students will most likely personalize it to meet their needs and this will ultimately favor their learning. This suggests that instructors need to be aware of the fact that students tailor learning tools and, thus, need to ask students how they are using them. Lurking may also be occurring and, even if it goes unseen, lecturers need to find out how Ning members are benefitting from it.

Despite the positive outcomes, these should be taken with caution given the small number of participants in this

study. The results may differ with larger numbers of participants or less motivated ones. Further research could investigate the student use of the Ning site with larger groups of members, members belonging to broader age ranges and for in-class and out-of-class activities, since the results may shed some light into how we can use social networking sites to support our teaching in English.

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