



New Web-based games: Facebook, Orkut, and ELT

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Introduction Games have been used in ELT in several forms and formats. From the more simple CD-ROM games to games like The Sims, teachers have discovered their potential in language teaching. There are some limitations in terms of equipment, for some games require more sophisticated systems. For some time now, there are also Web-based games which seem to attract kids and teens worldwide; usually, these games are played on-line. All these can be used in language teaching, provided that the teacher has some expertise in the new ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), and has access to the minimal system requirements; of course, it is also crucial to be familiarized with the game rules and functions. Recently, a new kind of games has appeared in social networks such as Facebook and Orkut. These are applications that can be easily installed in the computers which possess the minimal requirements – less than for traditional Web-based games –, and are also played on-line. This presentation will illustrate how to use these games in ELT, considering that Facebook and Orkut are among the most used among students of all ages. The first part of the presentation will be devoted to a brief review of technical information in terms of equipment and system configuration, which is basic to the use of such games. The second part will illustrate how these games can be applied in class, as extra tools for the teaching-learning process, or as part of longer projects involving not only language learning, but also other cognitive skills. Although considered by several adults – teachers included – as “kid stuff,” these games provide a variety of opportunities to explore language and other skills; in the ELT area, such games can be used to improve any of the four skills in a way that is both effective and fun. The use of such games uses the already high student motivation since kids and teens are heavy users of the Web and of these social networks these days, motivation that is not always easy to find in these age groups. Facebook and Orkut applications may be used to explore the basic four language skills, combined, which is even more productive, with different areas: mathematics, biology, flora and fauna, traditions, customs, ethics, cultural aspects in general, fashion, and relationships due to the variety of games available, from mafia wars to farming. This is a new era; these are new games; this is a new type of teaching.

Pros & Cons Social networks are extremely popular nowadays, and most likely every student – if not all – uses one of them: Twitter, Orkut, MySpace, Facebook, among others, even if they don't play the games offered by some of them. Some networks allow for the user's native language (Orkut); others are available only in English (Facebook). The ideas below apply to any social network, but to simplify I will focus on the games made available only by Facebook.

The obvious advantage of using these games is that most students are probably already users of one or more of these networks although they may not play the games that they offer. Anyway, they are already familiar with the website and its navigation. On the other hand, a great number of students already play the games offered by Facebook: Farmville, FishVille, Zoo World, Mafia Wars, FrontierVille, Verdonia, YoVille, Treasure Isle, Social City. Each game has a specific theme, which is already an advantage for teaching, given that we may explore different topics, vocabulary, expressions and grammar at different times. Let's see the most common:

FarmVille: you are a farmer who may grow plants, trees and animal, selling them when they are ready. You may also build things on your farm.

FishVille: you own an aquarium (called a tank) where you grow fish and sell them afterwards.

Zoo World: you own a zoo where you can place animals that you buy; you hire zoo keepers, veterinarians, and you can build things, too.

Mafia Wars: you are the member of a gang, and engage in violent jobs for the Mafia.

FrontierVille: you are a frontier man who plants, grows animals, clubs snakes and builds cabins.

Verdonia: you are the leader of a town in a kingdom, build cottages, barracks and mills, grow food and administer the whole village.

YoVille: you work, live in an apartment, go out, talk to people, and enjoy everything a city has to offer.

Treasure Isle: you are an adventurer who hunts treasures on different islands.

Social City: you are the mayor of a town that may have additional districts; you have to build factories, roads, houses, and provide leisure activities for your voters.

Basically, there is the risk of two disadvantages: (1) you and/or your students may be addicted to one or more games – it may be necessary to discuss the implications of this; (2) to advance in the games, it is necessary to earn points in order to change levels; to do that sometimes you have to buy things with the game money (which is automatically gained as you go along) or with real money – again it may be necessary to warn students (and parents) about the implications. In principle, I would strongly discourage spending real money on these games. Furthermore, to keep on the safe side, I would not encourage the game Mafia Wars; it may trigger too much competition and violence.

Using the games There is no limit to creativity and imagination, especially with the variety of themes at our disposal. Games – any games – may be played just for fun (in ELT too!), they may be played to illustrate topics that are covered in the textbook, or they may work as springboards for conversational exchanges. The Facebook games mentioned above may serve different purposes, for different age groups and different levels of English. Beginners may profit from names of plants, trees, animals, colors, places, buildings and actions found in the several games available. Lists of vocabulary words and expressions may be constructed this way, which may lead to specific exercises and activities, or to illustrations of what is in the textbooks used. Intermediate and advanced students may use the games to produce more complex chunks of language, with emphasis on grammar, reading and writing. Several games may be used to trigger conversation: the life on a farm, the fantasy of being a treasure hunter, what it would be like to have lived in a castle in the Middle Ages, different occupations, how to organize a better distribution of space in a city, how to provide leisure for the inhabitants of a small town, the environment, just to mention a few possibilities.

Projects The material available in the games can be used to develop short- to long-term projects such as webquests. When using FarmVille, for instance, a webquest may be created to explore the intricacies of growing plants and raising animals. A webquest or a scavenger hunt about the XIII century can be developed using Verdonia. The difficulties of running a city may be elicited using Social City. Most games bring new items and special procedures during particular celebrations (Christmas, Easter, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day) which may help in the design of special activities or projects. Blogs, or the social networks themselves, may be used to discuss steps of the project, to publish partial results, to summarize activities (especially Twitter). Sites that allow you to create comic strips, and sites that help you create exercises (crossword puzzles, hangman, cloze and fill in the blanks exercises, flash cards) may be combined to produce a variety of activities to practice what is being discussed. Wikis are an excellent environment to produce a collective composition, or the final document required by the project, which can also be achieved by slide or web presentations.

Conclusions The underlying idea here is that teachers may – and should – take advantage of the increasing use of social networks, and the games they offer. How to apply them to education, ELT in particular, will depend on the particular needs of each teacher, group or content. What we, in my opinion, shouldn't do is miss out on this great opportunity to enhance our classes, capitalizing on one of the fastest growing technologies of Web 3.0 – social networks.



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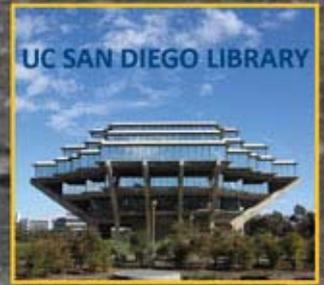
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