

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

English language learning through a Facebook group: activities for developing oral skills

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ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites (SNSs), though not initially designed for educational purposes, have long had a presence in educational contexts. In particular, the potential of Facebook (FB) and its Closed Group feature as a tool for language learning has been analyzed by several studies, although most seem to limit their scope to the use of Facebook for developing reading and writing skills. This paper attempts to investigate potential complementary activities that can be performed in connection with a Facebook Closed Group, using freely accessible tools, to assist with the development of oral skills in an English learning setting at the primary school level. Selected tools have been assessed, tested, and integrated into a Facebook closed group, in the scope of the topic “English-speaking countries”.

KEYWORDS: language learning; English learning; oral skills; Facebook group; Web2.0 tools.

Aprendendo língua inglesa através de grupo de Facebook: atividades de desenvolvimento de habilidades orais

RESUMO

Os sites de redes sociais, embora não inicialmente projetados para fins educacionais, já tiveram uma presença em contextos educacionais. Em particular, o potencial do Facebook (FB) e do seu Grupo Fechado como ferramenta para o aprendizado de língua foi analisado por vários estudos, embora a maioria pareça limitar seu alcance ao uso do Facebook para desenvolvimento de habilidades de leitura e escrita. Este artigo busca investigar potenciais atividades complementares que podem ser realizadas em conexão com um Grupo Fechado do Facebook, usando ferramentas de acesso livre para auxiliar no desenvolvimento de habilidades orais em um ambiente de aprendizagem de inglês em nível de escola primária. As ferramentas selecionadas foram avaliadas, testadas e integradas a um grupo fechado no Facebook, no âmbito do tópico “países de língua inglesa”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: aprendendo língua; aprendendo inglês; habilidade oral; grupo Facebook; ferramentas Web2.0.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of Web 2.0 and its applications brought about significant changes in the way we contact and communicate with each other in multiple contexts. Figuratively speaking, the Web 1.0 one-way street has been transformed into a Web 2.0 dual-carriageway: one-way communication becomes multi-way communication, content is not only user-received but also user-produced, with users now being active, collaborative, interactive, social-networked individuals in a connected world.

One of the areas where Web 2.0 had an extensive impact was Education: Social Network Sites, Social Media, Social Software are all expressions that we see nowadays associated with different aspects of teaching and learning, in spite of the fact that they weren't originally designed for educational purposes. But not only are the actors of the classroom social network exposed to the Web 2.0 and its tools in their daily lives but also the design of the tools themselves seems to promote an enriched learning process, which may explain instructors' (and students') interest.

The potential of using Social Network Sites (SNSs) for language learning purposes has been extensively studied in the past few years (Aydin, 2012; Ponte, 2013). Facebook, in particular, has been weighed and measured as a potential language learning tool, with some studies addressing its Closed Groups given the appeal of their private features, conducive to secure communications between young pupils (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). Most studies, however, tend to focus on the most obvious application of Facebook as a tool for language learning – as a means to develop reading and writing (Aydin, 2012) – with speaking skills being less object of attention.

In this paper, we propose a range of activities that can be performed inside a Facebook group to enhance oral production of early learners of English (primary school level). Section 2 assesses the relationship between Web 2.0 tools and Education in general; section 3 addresses the use of Facebook in an educational context for language learning purposes, while section 4 focuses on the particular use of a Closed Group in that context. Section 5 presents the proposed activities that can be performed inside a Closed Group to promote Oral Skills, evaluating their implementation, while section 6 concludes the paper.

2. WEB 2.0 TOOLS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: FACEBOOK

Facebook, in particular, has been the subject of several studies assessing its potential to create a technology-enhanced learning environment. While many (Ekoc, 2014; Blattner & Fiori, 2009) have indicated it seems to have a positive impact as a learning online community and as tool for teaching and learning, other works doubted its appropriateness for formal teaching and learning activities. Manca & Ranieri (2013, p. 496) questioned whether Facebook was “a tool suitable for learning?”; having analyzed 23 relevant articles, the authors concluded that “many of the most enthusiastic views (...) which prefigure future scenarios of learning

wherein the boundaries of formal education and participatory cultural patterns will be overcome in favor of new learning settings are still to be achieved” while also pointing out that the debate on “digital natives and their technological expectations of education” (p. 496) seemed to be contradicted by a number of the assessed studies, from which emerged that students don’t always feel comfortable with using Facebook in an educational context.

The potential of using Social Network Sites (SNSs) for learning purposes seems to be an ongoing discussion among the scientific community, though one aspect may remain uncontested in a language learning context: the fact that social media communication or social network sites provide “occasions for learners to receive input and produce output while engaging in negotiation of meaning” (Ekoc, 2014, p. 18) by offering an opportunity for communicating in a real situation context instead of one created solely for classroom interaction.

3. FACEBOOK GROUP: A LEARNING SOCIAL NETWORK IN A SOCIAL NETWORK SITE

Multiple studies have focused on Facebook Groups as an educational tool for language learning, which may be due to the fact that it mimics (online) the concept of a classroom which is – in itself – a social network (following the original definition by Barnes, 1954, cited by Haruma et. al., 2016, p. 480), while making the roles of each actor more flexible and providing different settings for interaction.

Ekoc (2014, p. 18) points out that “teachers can instigate class group pages in the social media in an attempt to provide a space for practice and communication free of the traditional pedagogic concerns of a typical classroom” further indicating that

The face-to-face classroom is a controlled communication event, that is, teachers and students are required to be in the classroom at the same time but a teacher’s use of Facebook is an attempt to communicate with students outside of that controlled environment where teachers can meet students in their territory.

Although we wouldn’t go as far as stating that the use of a Facebook group for teaching purposes would be completely free of pedagogical concerns, we do appreciate its pedagogical affordances, the learning flexibility and collaborative potential it offers. A group of learners (language or otherwise) that creates (or participates in) a class Facebook group is, in a way, extending the physical and chronological boundaries of their own learning social network and incorporating in its praxis different tools; it is further both contributing to a common discussion and expecting feedback from its peers, building knowledge and competences collaboratively.

Specifically, for language learning purposes, a Facebook group provides “authentic language interaction” and helps develop “socio-pragmatic awareness (language use in specific contexts, relationship building, and

language awareness through observation and/or experience), which is an aspect of language acquisition that is often omitted in textbooks” (Blattner, 2009, p. 25).

Some security concerns are voiced when there is a discussion on the creation of a group on social media to complement classroom activities, especially for young learners. Facebook Closed Groups, due to their privacy features, are conducive to secure communications between pupils and can, therefore, be used without fear of foreign interference.

4. FACEBOOK GROUP: PROPOSED AND IMPLEMENTED ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE ORAL PROFICIENCY

Most studies on the Closed Group feature tend to focus on its most obvious application as a tool for language learning: one that “improves foreign and second language learning skills in reading and writing” (Aydin, 2012, p. 1101), with listening and speaking being less object of attention.

In this paper, we propose a range of activities that can be performed inside a Facebook group to enhance speaking skills. The assessed tools were aggregated, characterized, tested, and evaluated for suitability according to the planned activities.

4.1 Tool selection

The first step undertaken was to list currently freely available tools that allow for the recording of sound as a sole activity or in combination with other media, organized by their presented features.

4.1.1 Types of tools

The number of potential tools that can be used in a language learning context is quite daunting when one attempts to evaluate their potential as a learning tool. A first attempted classification system found for such tools was presented by Alemi (2016) in her article on how to integrate learning modern technologies in a language learning scenario and in which the following tools for speaking practice were listed: Video Conferencing, Internet Voice Chatting, Speech Synthesis Programs, Social Robots, Mobile Games. We consider this classification to be, however, too broad to be applicable in this study as it considers technologies that go beyond the scope of Web 2.0 and our scenario includes the use of tools that can promote oral proficiency to be used in conjunction with a Facebook group.

Further studies offering similar classification of tools have not been found; we have therefore attempted to classify the tools that can be used to enhance speaking skills in a language learning scenario based on their possible application, as follows, considering them as applications that:

- allow Simple/Single Sound Recording;
- allow Serialized Sound Recording / Podcasts;
- allow the combination of Sound Recording with Static Picture;

- allow the combination of *Sound Recording with Multiple Documents* (Static Picture, Picture Series or Documents);
- allow *Sound Recording (Voice-Over) with creation of animation* (situational animation or user-representation – Avatar);
- support Video recording;
- support Live Video or Audio Conversation.

Some of these tools would fall under the commonly used categories of “audio tools” or “video tools” or be characterized as “synchronous” or “asynchronous”, but we have considered that aggregating them based on their type of use could be more advantageous for future studies, to facilitate selection by instructors.

Table 1: Tool characterization and examples

Features	Possible tools
Simple/Single Sound Recording	Vocaroo, Chirbit
Serialized Sound Recording / Podcasts	Soundcloud, Podomatic
Sound Recording with Static Picture	Blabberize, Fotobabble
Sound Recording with Multiple Documents	VoiceThread
Sound Recording (Voice-Over) with creation of animation	Tellagami, Voki, Powtoon
Video Recording	Instagram
Live Video or Audio Conversation	Facebook Live Video

There was initially an 8th category dealing with the possibility of active listening (listening to a text, recording a repetition, and having the software assess it) but the tested applications that claimed to possess those features weren't fully operational.

It is also worth mentioning that there are, for each category, several other potential tools (with Skype being the most obvious one for Live Video/Audio conversation), though we opted to limit this list to tools that allow for integration with Facebook, and indicate the most promising ones.

4.1.2 Criteria for tool selection and tool assessment

The suitability of the listed tools for the planned application was then evaluated against a set of criteria, with the purpose of selecting tools that are:

- simple enough to be used by non-tech savvy users;
- accessible to English Language Learners;
- able to produce content that could be integrated with Facebook group (preferably directly);
- appropriate for classroom use;
- free to use.

The following table presents the conclusions of the tool assessment.

Table 2: Tool features

Tool	Cost	Web, iOS, Android	Features	Output	Facebook Integration
Simple/Single Sound Recording					
Vocaroo	Free, no registration	Web	+ Simple usage + no time limit – no direct integration with FB	MP3, OGG, WAV, FLAC; embed code	User added link
Chirbit	Free, registration	Web	+ simple usage + direct integration with FB	Share to FB and Twitter; QR code; embed code	Direct Post to FB Group (integrated)
Serialized Sound Recording / Podcasts					
Soundcloud	Free, registration	Web	+ simple usage + allows comments on track (text) – no direct integration with FB	Share to FB, Twitter, Google+, Tumblr, Pinterest; share by email; embed code	Direct Link to FB; no direct integration
Sound Recording with Static Picture					
Blabberize	Free, Registration	Web	+ simple usage + though picture is static, possible to animate the subject's mouth – video download not operational	Video (not operational); embed code; direct link	User added link
Fotobabble	Free, Registration	Web	+ simple usage – loses to Blabberize since no animation possible	Embed code; direct link	User added link
Sound Recording with Multiple Documents					
Voicethread	Free, Registration	Web	+ collaborative + multimedia slideshow: voice recording/text on images, video, etc + allows recorded feedback – usage more complex – limited number of Voicethreads	Embed code; direct link; share to FB (not group but Profile) and Twitter	User added link; Direct Post to FB profile (link)
Sound Recording (Voice-Over) with creation of animation					
Tellagami	Free, download	Android, iOS	+ simple usage + creative voice recording tool to create short presentations / speeches – Android currently not supported – 30 seconds limitation	Video download; video share (email, Instagram, WhatsApp, Skype, YouTube); Direct link	Direct Post to FB Group (integrated); Connection from YouTube or Instagram
Voki	Free to create, registration needed to edit	Web	+ creative voice recording tool to create speaking avatars + multiple customization options – simple usage, but it gives, some echo/ feedback on sound recording – 60 seconds limitation	Direct link, share to FB, Twitter, Google+	Direct Link to FB
Powtoon	Free, registration	Web	+ highly creative animation creation, with multiple customization options and possibility for creation of dialogues – very complex usage	Vimeo/YouTube upload; direct link; PPT/PDF download; share to Twitter, FB, Google+, LinkedIn.	File upload to FB group (integrated)
Recorded video					
Instagram	Free, registration	Web, Android, iOS	– Instagram account needed	Posted to IG, shared to FB	Linked with FB account
Live video or audio conversation					
Facebook Live Video	Free (for FB users)	Web, Android, iOS	– not available on all platforms – associated with profile, no option to make visible to group without indicating friends who can access – complex usage	Live stream to chosen audience, possibility to save to profile	Facebook profile

4.2 Contextualization of the study

4.2.1 Course unit and language targets

The planned activities occurred in the scope of a Secret Facebook group created for a Primary school class of Young English Learners of a public school in the district of Aveiro, Portugal, with the main aim of showcasing learners' in-class works, while also promoting short interactions in the target language in a contextualized environment.

We've chosen, for this planned unit, the subject of "English-Speaking Countries", which provides interesting possibilities for short research tasks and group work. As the author is currently not teaching at the primary school level, the tools were tested in a classroom setting with the collaboration of the English teacher of a very small 4th year class who has had English classes for the past three years. The original plan was to have two different groups testing the tools, but this was not possible due to low class attendance on the day, so the testing went ahead with the collaboration of one ten- and one eleven-year old students. Since both students are below the age-limit defined by Facebook for creating an account, the accounts used to post content to the group were those of the researcher (with the role of providing feedback and eliciting replies) and of the classroom teacher (with the role of the student).

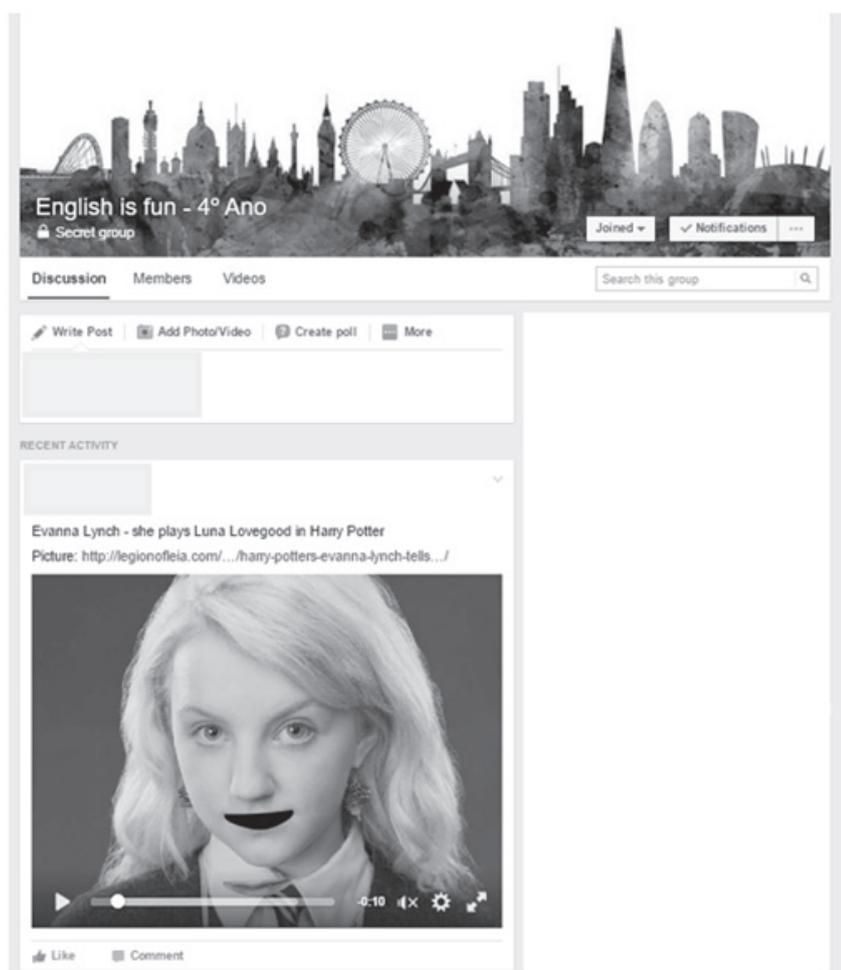


Figure 1: Facebook Secret Group – “English is fun”

4.2.2 Language targets

The planned activities have taken into consideration the curricular targets established for this learning group, which corresponds to an A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR):

- listening targets: “to understand simple sentences, articulated in a clear and paused manner”;
- reading targets: “to understand sentences and simple texts”;
- spoken interaction targets: “to express yourself in an adequate manner in simple contexts”, “to interact with teacher and colleagues in simple and previously prepared situations”;
- spoken production targets: “to express himself/herself with limited vocabulary in previously prepared situations”, “to talk about discussed matters”;
- writing targets: “to use known words”, “to produce a simple text with limited vocabulary”;
- intercultural targets: “to know yourself and the other”, “to develop knowledge of your world and the outside world”.

The activities were chosen considering the language targets in terms of oral production indicated above for the students executing the tasks and also the potential receptive tasks for their audience (their peers), since even though our focus in this study is oral production, we are aware that the learning cycle for language acquisition assumes that listening precedes speaking.

4.2.3 Introductory activities

The planned tasks developed by the researcher with the class were preceded by these activities between class and English teacher:

- the topic “English-speaking countries” is initially introduced by the teacher, who elicits from the students the names of English-speaking countries that they are aware of. Through a Powerpoint presentation made by the teacher the selected countries are then briefly presented, and three different presentations on Portugal are given by the teacher to serve as model for activities 2, 3 and 4;
- the teacher informs the students that they will be working in groups, with each group being tasked with the presentation of one of the countries listed previously. The products of these presentations will be added to the class’s Facebook group.

4.3 Proposed activities: implementation and assessment

Based on our tool evaluation and the activities usually conducted in this topic the researcher selected four tools: Chirbit, Voicethread, Tellagami and Blabberize, each being used to present a different aspect of the group work and to conduct a different activity.

4.3.1 First activity: Chirbit

The first activity made used of Chirbit, a simple sound recording tool, used by the students to record the presentation of the group members and to name the country they will be presenting.

Table 3: First activity – Chirbit

Task	Presentation of the group and indication of the country that they will be working on
Type	Simple Sound Recording, integrated on Facebook Group.
Task Description	For this activity each group has to record themselves using the website Chirbit, following a script provided by the teacher and completed by the students, with the following structure: Student 1: My name is [name]. Student 2: My name is [name]. Student 3: My name is [name]. Random student or group of students: We are group number [number] and we will talk about [country] Each group will be asked to access Chirbit through the account set up by the teacher and record the message. The recording will be shared directly from Chirbit to Facebook, and posted directly on the Group's page, with the support of the teacher.

The activity is quite simple: the short utterances are recorded easily and for unexpected situations the sound can be recorded on a mobile phone and directly uploaded to Chirbit, which supports multiple file types (MP3, AC, AIF, AIF, CAF, OGG, 3GA, M4A, AMR, WMA, FLAC, WAV, MOV, MOD, 3GP, AAC, AVI, MIDI, MP4, RM, WebM)

The integration with Facebook Group is quite seamless, as Chirbit allows one to post directly to a given profile or to a participating group, though not as reply to a previous post. For the recording stage the students described this task as “interesting”.

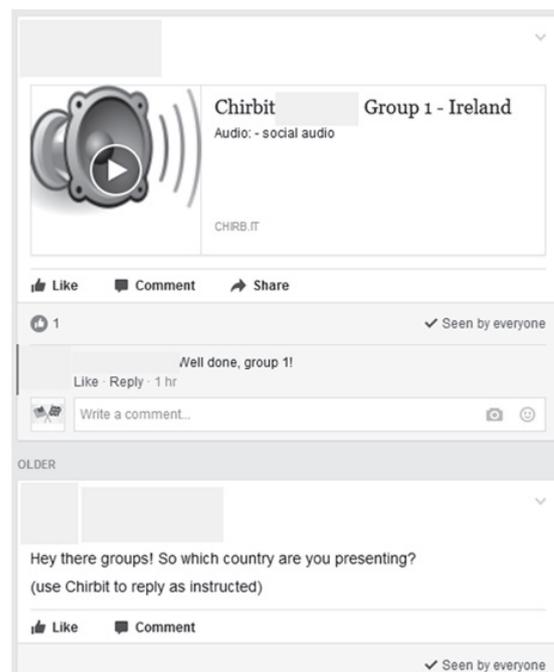


Figure 2: Facebook Group Page – First Activity Chirbit

Chirbit recording accessible: [link and names removed to preserve anonymity for blind review]

4.3.2 Second activity: Voicethread

The second activity made use of Voicethread, an online based tool that allows for the creation of multimedia presentations, including the recording of sound.

Table 4: Second activity – Voicethread

Task	Presentation of an English-speaking country
Type	Multimedia slideshow with voice-over
Task Description	<p>For this activity each group has to select information and pictures about the country they will be presenting, following guidelines given by the teacher. They will have to access the free stock photo website Pixabay and download pictures illustrating the following elements:</p> <p><i>Map</i> - https://pixabay.com/en/ireland-map-drawn-holiday-1487007/ <i>Capital</i> - https://pixabay.com/en/dublin-temple-bar-tourism-leisure-375419/ <i>People</i> - https://pixabay.com/en/ireland-street-music-dublin-698193/ <i>Symbol</i> - https://pixabay.com/en/clover-shamrocks-irish-day-luck-445255/ <i>Sightseeing</i> - https://pixabay.com/en/trinity-college-library-dublin-1568679/ <i>Languages</i> - https://pixabay.com/en/sign-posts-street-sign-post-sign-91312/ <i>Flag</i> (to be used in act. 4) - https://pixabay.com/en/irish-flag-ireland-flag-ireland-981641/</p> <p>The teacher will support the group in drafting the script for the presentation: This is [country] The capital of [country] is [name of capital] [Country] has a population of [population] The symbol of [country] is [symbol] This is the [monument/place of interest]. The languages spoken in [country] are [languages].</p> <p>The group will be asked to create a Voicethread account, a slideshow with the accompanying recorded script (a commented slideshow), which will be linked to the Facebook Group Page.</p>

The selection of the pictures may be a difficult step as when searching on Pixabay the students will be required to input different English keywords to achieve a wider range of pictures from which to choose (the combination “Ireland+People” for example, doesn’t render satisfactory results for the concept “Population”).

Given the limitation in the creation of free Voicethreads (1-2 files are possible simultaneously), each group has to register to access the website and not use a joint account or a teacher provided account.

The tool has a slightly longer learning curve and may require a more close assistance from the teacher, namely on defining the settings before the recording is done, but the recording process itself is rather straightforward. Also problems during the recording can be easily solved without the need to start the process again: in one attempt, we’ve added too many seconds for the transition between images, unaware that the recorded track would add more time to this period; the recorded tracks can be, though, saved as single files, and incorporated both on a different or on the same slideshow without requiring a new recording. Another feature of this tool that we have not worked with but consider as very interesting is the fact that it allows comments (via text or sound recording) from viewers which will be added to the thread (hence the name, Voicethread). To summarize, this activity was considered rather satisfactory from the point of view of both participating students and teacher.

The only drawback for our study is that it is not possible to embed the result directly to the Group: the Voicethread has to be posted as a link and it will be opened on a new window. This is also true when one attempts to incorporate a Voicethread on Wix and Wordpress: although it is possible to visualize a representative picture, it is not possible to play the Voicethread directly on the created Wix site or Wordpress blog. Other platforms were not tested in this study.

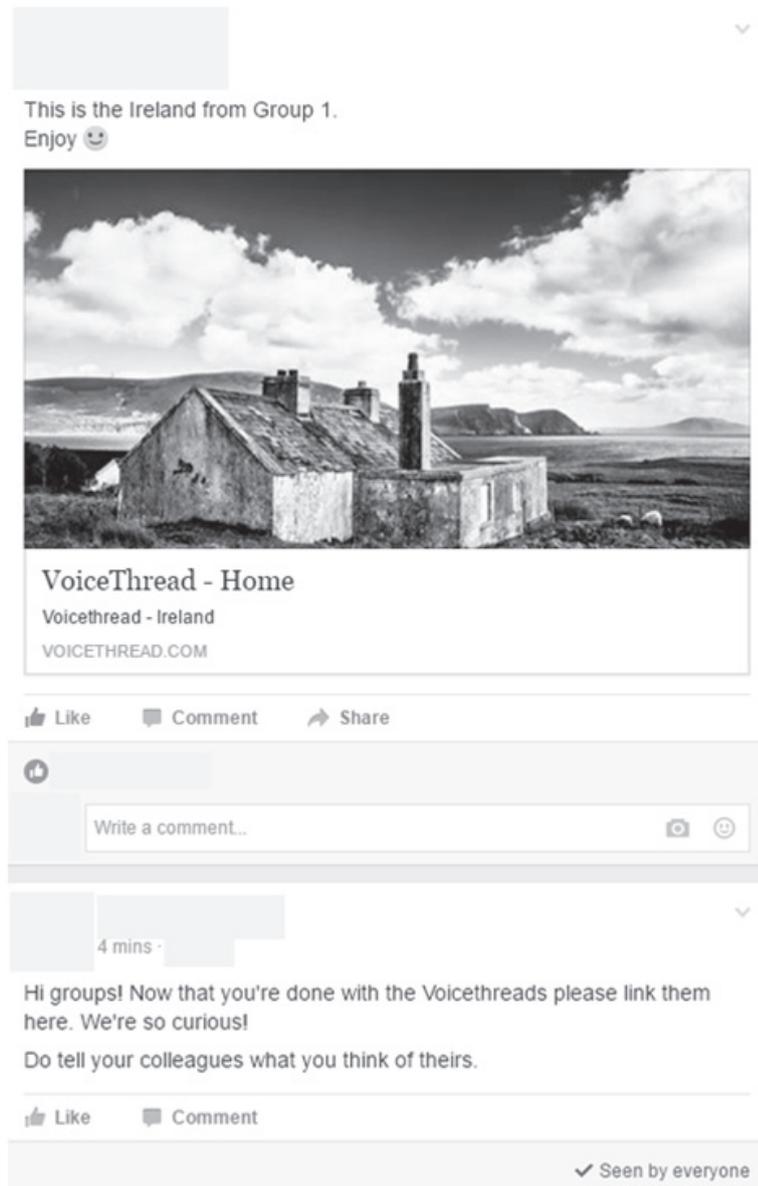


Figure 3: Facebook Group Page – Second Activity - Voicethread
Voicethread accessible: *[link and names removed to preserve anonymity for blind review]*

4.3.3 Third activity: Tellagami

The third task, where students presented the flag of the chosen country, was conducted with Tellagami, an app that enables the creation of short animation with voice-over features.

Table 5: Third activity – Tellagami

Task	Animated presentation of the flag of the different countries, with a short voice-over description
Type	Voice-over on animation
Task Description	Each group will access the Tellagami application, one at a time, on the teacher's mobile phone and under teacher supervision. Using the image of the flag they have downloaded in the previous activity, each group will select the features of the animation and record a small description of their flag: This is the flag of [country]. It has got [descriptive feature]. It is [colours]. The animation will be saved and shared directly to Facebook or downloaded as video file and uploaded onto Facebook.

Although Tellagami used to be available for Android, it is currently only offered for iOS, and not listed for download on Play Store. However, it is possible to download the application from alternative sites and install it on Android systems. The free version has limited customization versions (only two characters – one male, one female; clothes, hair and other features can only be customized in terms of color change; several mood types), but allows for different backgrounds, including the use of files selected by the user and a doodle tool. There is the possibility to include messages that will be conveyed by the chosen character (8 voices are available) via sound recording.

The animation can be shared by video (by downloading a video file), by YouTube, Instagram, or directly to Facebook. As the Facebook share feature was causing some issues on the mobile phone being used, we opted to save the video file and upload it directly to the Facebook group.

The students felt quite drawn to this activity, given the animated features. The 30-second limitation is not an obstacle to the use of this tool as long as you select short, descriptive texts or use it to provide a short answer/question moment. The limited customization features are also not a drawback, although the paid Edu version (with more customization options and text-to-speech features) does seem appealing for a class that would make a more regular use.

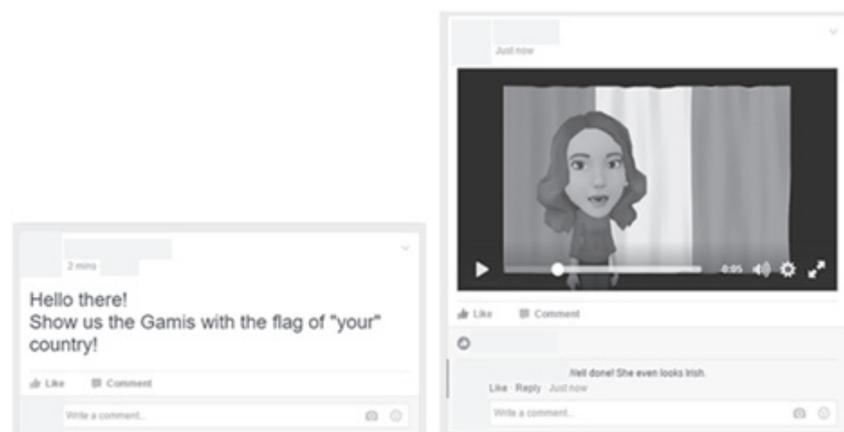


Figure 4: Facebook Group Page – Third Activity – Tellagami
Gami accessible: *[link and names removed to preserve anonymity for blind review]*

4.3.4 Fourth activity: Blabberize

The fourth and last task involved Blabberize, an online.-based tool that allows a picture to be animated in a pattern matching the speech recorded.

Table 6: Fourth activity – Blabberize

Task	Presentation of a famous person, native from the country they were assigned to research
Type	Voice-over on static picture with small animation (mouth)
Task Description	<p>Each group has to choose a famous person, search and select a picture of that individual, and note down the following information (by researching on Wikipedia): name, age, origin, nationality, hair and eye color, and job. They proceed with writing down a “self-presentation” of the person, using known structures, with the help of the teacher:</p> <p>My name is [name]. I’m [age] years old. I’m from [country]. I’m [nationality]. I’ve got [color] hair and [color] eyes. I’m a/an [job].</p> <p>They are asked to access Blabberize with the account set by the teacher, where they upload the picture and record the listed sentences, two sentences per student. Blabberize lists the possibility to convert the animation to video, although some attempts at this were unsuccessful while others succeeded. The last step of this activity would involve then either posting the link to the animation on the Facebook group or the video, if possible.</p>

Although the process is simple, the website reacts rather slowly, which may cause delays. The process of uploading, selecting the area to be animated (mouth) and recording is rather simple, though if any issues occur, the recording will have to be restarted as there is no save/repeat option.

Considering the simplicity of the tool, the fact that it is freely available online and the feedback of the students, we believe this is a quite motivating and interesting tool for supporting speaking activities.

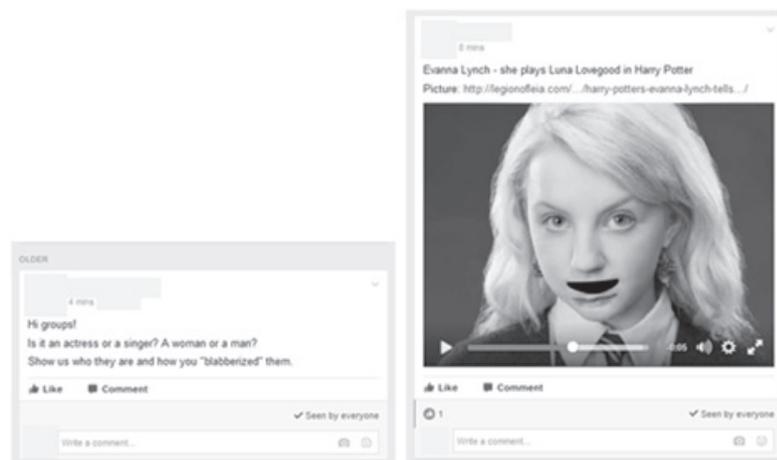


Figure 5: Facebook Group Page – Fourth Activity - Blabberize
 Blabberize accessible: [link and names removed to preserve anonymity for blind review]

5. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER WORK

We believe that the tools shown in this study can be used both in a classroom for presenting group or individual work in a different way, or

in the scope of a Facebook Group, which showcases students' in-class or out-of-class works. The size of the group of participants was a limitation to this study. If it had been performed in a larger group, it would have benefited from a truly interactive class Facebook Group, where students could post their works, receive and provide feedback on each other's efforts, even if limited by the fact that most students would have been unable to use their own personal accounts and would have to use alternative ones such as their teacher's, as occurred. But we do believe that it has proven the feasibility of conducting activities that promote oral skills, combined with more traditional written-based comments and post tasks, and that the creation of a closed Facebook group and the execution of the types of activities described can be successfully executed with older pupils (then able to create personal accounts and interact as such), who are learning English, given the flexibility of the tested tools. The narrow focus of this study was on tools that could be used solely in conjunction with a Facebook Group, leaving outside of its scope several other interesting applications that can be addressed in a future broader study.

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Tools

- Chirbit – <http://www.chirbit.com/>
 Tellagami – <https://tellagami.com/>
 Voicethread – <http://voicethread.com/>
 Blabberize – <http://blabberize.com/>
 Facebook - <http://www.facebook.com/>