

# Universal Design Learning and Social Networks Joining Forces to Promote Authenticity in EFL Learning<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

English language instructors regularly witness how various social, pedagogical and individual elements intersect and influence one another in their classrooms. Every language program is shaped by the characteristics of their local, regional and national contexts. On a similar vein, knowledge and skills are framed under particular linguistic goals and needs. Each learner's abilities need to be acknowledged to maximize their potential and ensure meaningful learning despite their differences. It is under this intersection of elements that this article proposes an approach to converge three main social, pedagogical and individual variables. By taking key principles of the Universal Design Learning approach (UDL), a series of learning tasks were designed. These tasks incorporate social networks as a way to bridge the common gap between lack of authenticity and foreign language learning contexts. UDL addresses the desire to make content accessible to diverse learning styles and abilities by providing students with different ways to engage in learning while social networks provide authentic language use. The tasks in this article include a single-point rubric that suggests conversational feedback to foster learners' metacognitive awareness.

## Resumen

Muy a menudo los profesores de inglés son testigos de como varios elementos sociales, pedagógicos e individuales se intersectan durante sus clases. Además, cada programa de idiomas se desarrolla bajo las características propias de su contexto local, regional y nacional. De la misma manera, el conocimiento y las habilidades están enmarcados por necesidades y objetivos particulares. Cada estudiante necesita que sus habilidades sean reconocidas para maximizar su potencial y así asegurarse que, a pesar de sus diferencias, cada uno de ellos se beneficia de un proceso de aprendizaje significativo. Es bajo esta intersección de elementos que este artículo propone un enfoque para converger variables sociales, pedagógicas e individuales. Tomando principios claves del enfoque del Diseño Universal de Aprendizaje (DUA), este artículo propone el diseño de una serie de tareas de aprendizaje que incorporan las redes sociales las cuales sirven de puente para cerrar la brecha existente entre la falta de autenticidad en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. DUA aborda el deseo de hacer que el contenido de la clase sea accesible a diversos estilos y habilidades de aprendizaje mediante la dotación de diferentes maneras para participar activamente en el aprendizaje. Las redes sociales por su parte proveen espacios de uso auténtico del idioma. Las tareas presentadas en este artículo además incluyen una rúbrica de un solo punto que sugiere un proceso de retroalimentación conversacional como mecanismo para promover la conciencia metacognitiva de los estudiantes en el proceso de evaluación.

Context determines the distinction between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL). While the latter usually refers to teaching English in multilingual groups in countries where English is the official or dominant language, the former most often refers to monolingual classrooms in countries where the official language is other than English. While both contexts have their own special focus, EFL instructors cannot ignore this contextual condition and its implications. Issues like out-of-class linguistic environment, linguistic and culture homogeneity, and a need to create the target linguistic and cultural environment in class are an extra burden on EFL teachers' shoulders. All those challenges are rooted in the lack of an authentic language context that jeopardizes meaningful language learning.

Authenticity, then, can take many interrelated meanings. It can be understood either as authentic teaching materials or self-expression through the development of authentic voice (Roberts & Cooke, 2009). It also relates to the origin of the language used. In this case, authentic language is produced by native speakers in their interest to communicate with other native speakers, and the ability to behave or think like a target language group in order to be recognized and validated (Gilmore, 2007). All these constructions represent challenges for EFL learners and instructors. EFL instructors who want to provide rich learning experiences under a foreign context framework are many since expanding circle countries that teach English for international communication constitute by far the majority of the world's English users. In countries like Bolivia, Costa Rica, Chile, Greece, Turkey, Thailand, China, Japan, and Korea, English is used for international domains (Lowenberg, 2002).

These expanding circles need to provide as much authenticity as possible to maximize meaningful learning. Learners cannot rely on daily life interaction opportunities since English is not the language of

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communication in their surroundings. The idea of using the target language in spontaneous social interactions is remote. Fortunately, living in the era of instant communication, language learners have at hand social networks where they can interact with people worldwide.

### **Social Networks in the Era of Information and Communications Technologies**

Even when there is not an intrinsic theoretical basis for the use of technology in the language classroom, various studies have shown its positive influence on student motivation and teacher instruction. More specifically, social networking is recognized as educational technology because it has moved from having a limited noneducational purpose to being an effective means for instructors and students to communicate (Sokolik, 2014). However, due to students' constant contact, its accessibility and rich English interaction possibilities, social networking deserves a more protagonist role in language learning rather than just a means to communicate.

New generations are born and grow up in an era where the Internet is accessible in the mass market. People have access to social media interactions through their phones and in public and private places. They carry in their pockets and bags an everyday tool that allows them to create and exchange their own generated content. Language learners are not an exception. They grow up surrounded by technology and are accustomed to using new media throughout their daily lives. As a result, research on language teaching and learning has witnessed great interest in the topic. Social media has the power to make a variety of interaction types accessible to students. It is no longer limited to written information; indeed, snapchats, stories, tutorials and live chats represent not only a rich source of listening input but also a platform for oral production. Social networks do not constitute a threat to instructors anymore; they have captured learners' attention in a way that it is hard to measure (Tess, 2013). We have lost the battle against them. In our role as educators, our goal should be directed toward bringing those networks to our learners' experiences so that learning connects with the tangible world of students and creates a learning opportunity measured by students' ability to interact in English with speakers around the world.

Cultural and cross-cultural skills are an added value of using social networks to learn English. It is no secret that digital environments host cultural information that is accessible to users. Fortunately, intercultural communication is no longer restricted to travelling to new countries or cities; through social networking people have overcome the barriers of accessibility and resources. In this era of information and communication technologies, the internet has given social networking the tools for people to communicate with others on a global scale that used to be only available on a local level. In fact, social networks exist to build social relationships among people who share interests and activities. Finding ways to invite social networking into the language class can prompt authentic social use where students build relationships by using the target language as the means to communicate.

This search for new teaching and learning techniques should not be taken lightly. In an attempt to catch up with teaching and learning theories and to help learners attain high standards, language instructors should be open to new approaches that have a positive impact. One of those new approaches is Universal Design Learning (UDL) that aims to respond to the modern redesign of education. This approach acknowledges the key role technology has not only in learning, but also in viewing students as social beings.

### **Universal Design Learning (UDL)**

The root of UDL ties together the work of educational researchers who advocate a break from traditional teaching and acknowledges learner diversity. More specifically, this concept intersects and incorporates ideas regarding multi-sensory teaching, multiple intelligences, differentiated instruction and performance-based assessment (Rose, Meyer, Strangmen & Rappolt, 2002). This framework appropriates the opportunity to create flexible methods that can reach diverse learners as a response to rapidly evolving communication technologies (Rose et al., 2002). On this account, new technologies offer language instructors the possibility to respond to individual learning differences through varied media. The origin of UDL comes from Universal Design (UD), which is a set of principles that guides the design of architecture and products that are targeted to reach the broadest range of individuals possible who vary in age, abilities, characteristics, and life stages. They both share a common objective of universal access, but in different contexts. While UD focuses on building environment, UDL is expressed in learning environments (Institute for Human Centered Design, 2016; La, Dyjur, & Bair, 2018; Pisha & Coyne, 2001).

Premised on a basic understanding of the learning brain, Rose, et al (2002) explained that UDL identifies three small networks within the large cortical connective tissue. Identified as recognition, strategic, and

affective networks, they have commonalities with the Vygotskian view of learning. Accordingly, for learning to take place, three pre-requisite should be met; (a) recognition of the information to be learned, (b) engagement with the learning task and lastly, and (c) application of strategies to process that information to be learned (Rose, et al., 2002). Recognition networks respond to the what of learning and emphasize the idea of representing information and content in different ways. Affective networks are driven by how and why motivation may stimulate interest and engagement. Finally, strategic networks respond to how learners differentiate the ways they can express what they know (CAST, 2018).

While recognition networks sense and assign meaning to what learners see and enables them to identify and understand information, ideas, and concepts, strategic networks generate and manage mental and motor patterns in the form of planning, executing, and monitoring actions and skills. For their part, affective networks focus on evaluating and assigning emotional significance. Notably, they are responsible for engaging learners with tasks, learning, and the world (Rose, et al., 2002). UDL targets diversifying learning so that all students in spite of their differences are actively involved (Katz, 2012). In this pursuit, seven principles aim at designing inclusive learning experiences. These principles are equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and lastly, size and space for approach and use.

It is vital, then, to recognize Goleman's (2006) and Davidson's (2008) insights on brain research. They explain that there is evidence that teaching and learning activities can change brain function and consequently brain structure through the production of adaptive responses in social and intellectual functioning. It has become imperative to look for new strategies to allow students to show what they know and look for new learning opportunities in a variety of ways. Goleman (2006) and Davidson (2008) show how principles from different approaches can join forces to provide alternative classroom tasks that aim at diversifying language learning.

### **UDL and Social Networks in the EFL Class**

Drawing on the idea that UDL is compatible with other approaches to learning (La et al., 2018), it aligns with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in its interest to meet learners' diverse needs. In the particular case of TBLT, it attempts to meet learners' diverse psycholinguistic and communicative needs (Long, 2014). One of the main reasons why tasks are suited to UDL is its focus on meaning and the purpose of connecting learning with the real world. Tasks are defined as things learners do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between (Long, 2014). With this in mind, integrating social networks into language tasks may give students a deeper meaning to language learning since they may identify a tangible purpose of its understanding and use beyond the classroom.

With a series of sample learning tasks that incorporate social networks and UDL principles, instructors can weave principles from both approaches together and suggest ways to access and engage students with course content, materials and information. Instructors can also offer flexible alternatives to learning tasks. By bringing social networks to language learning tasks, they may promote more active and meaningful interaction with learners' external world that otherwise would have been inaccessible. More specifically, in the case of EFL contexts, learners might have the opportunity to cross borders and be immersed in more natural language use settings. Technology breaks geographical barriers. Indeed, students can contact others who live in other parts of the world without traveling or even spending money through apps and social networks. In addition, through the internet, students can quickly communicate by responding, posting and sharing visual content.

Designing learning tasks requires some needs assessment about students' preferences and access to resources. It is necessary to know which social networks are more popular as well as what type of internet access students have. Once instructors have this inventory of resources and information, the next step is to be clear about the linguistic objectives and content that need to be covered in the particular courses. The following design follows the flexibility of use principle of UDL and fosters learners to make decisions during the tasks. Class pace always poses challenges for both instructors and students so assigning learning tasks as extra class work is an option. By doing so, learners will take their language practice outside the formal classroom setting. However, when time permits, learning tasks should be flexible enough to perform during class time.

### The Learning Tasks

The procedures for design implementation are framed by answering three questions: WHAT?, WHY? and HOW? These questions are connected to UDL recognition, affective networks and strategic networks, respectively. In the WHAT section, which is the first step, the instructor presents the language topic of the task. Either as an introduction or review of the topic, this section can be as extensive as desired however, the samples provided in this document are brief reviews. The second section responds to the WHY and intends to activate attention by providing learners with opportunities to challenge themselves and discover new ideas (Katz, 2012). This section incorporates social networks in the process in a way that learners can use them to enrich their contact with authentic language that is produced by other speakers in other language communities where English is used spontaneously and for social purposes. Finally, the HOW question provides students with the opportunity to freely choose the information and content they learned in different ways depending on their preferences. More specifically, learners plan, organize and execute an oral report using social digital media with different examples of the language form under study and their own examples. Learners also report on challenges they faced and what they did to complete their learning experience.

This is a proposed set of procedures only; the duration and depth will always depend on the needs and opportunities of each class and school. In other words, tasks can be as long and as complex as desired. This proposal is simple and is based on an EFL teaching environment in a rural university campus in a Spanish speaking country.

### Sample Learning Tasks

#### Sample Learning Task 1

Level: Beginners

Topic: Irregular verbs

WHAT?	Irregular verbs-past tense
Topic (representation)	Irregular verbs are verbs that don't take on the regular -d, -ed, or -ied spelling patterns of the past simple. Examples: I <b>bought</b> 3 cakes for my birthday (buy). I <b>ate</b> 2 slices of my chocolate cake (eat).  The best way to learn irregular past tense verbs is through practice. It might help to keep an irregular past tense verb chart at first. However, the best way is to use the verb several times.
WHY?	INSTAGRAM
Resource (engagement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to the use of irregular verbs you encounter in the different status, stories and captions of the people you follow.</li> <li>• Identify them as well as their use.</li> <li>• Write a list if necessary.</li> </ul>
HOW? Report (action and expression)	By producing any type of digital media: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report your findings and examples of the use of irregular verbs.</li> <li>• add your new examples of use.</li> <li>• mention other resources used.</li> </ul>

#### Sample Learning Task 2

Level: Intermediate

Topic: Collocations

WHAT?	Collocations
Topic (representation)	Collocations are combinations of two or more words which are usually used together. Some examples are: Do homework Make a mistake Have a party.  <i>Learning collocations is important because your language will be more natural, and you will have more ways of expressing yourself.</i>  <i>Key fact: it is easier for our brains to remember and use language in chunks rather than as single words.</i>
WHY?	Any YouTube tutorial of your choice
Resource (engagement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to collocations you encounter in the different status, stories and captions.</li> <li>• Identify the particularity of each combination.</li> <li>• Write a list if necessary.</li> <li>• Create your own examples.</li> </ul>
HOW?	By producing any type of digital media: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report your findings and examples of the use of collocations.</li> <li>• mention other resources used.</li> </ul>

Sample Learning Task 3

Level: Advanced

Topic: Phrasal verbs

WHAT?	Inseparable phrasal verbs
Topic (representation)	<p>There are two types of phrasal verbs with an object: separable or inseparable. If the phrasal verb is <b>separable</b>, the noun can go between the verb and particle (adverb or preposition) or after the particle. For example, "Please, <u>turn</u> the lights <u>off</u>" or '<u>turn off</u> the lights." When using the pronoun, the pronoun must go between the words. You cannot say "<u>turn off</u> them"; you must say "<u>turn</u> them <u>off</u>."                  In the case of <b>inseparable phrasal verbs</b>, the phrasal verb has an object but is inseparable. This means that the object always goes after the verb and particle even when it's a pronoun.                  Some examples are:                  They <u>look after</u> the children.                  They <u>look after</u> them'.                  But NEVER "they <u>look</u> them <u>after</u>."  <b>Key fact:</b> phrasal verbs are colloquial and are seldom suited for formal writing.</p>
WHY?	TWITTER
Resource (engagement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to phrasal verbs you encounter in the different twitter posts</li> <li>• Analyze the context of their use.</li> <li>• Write a list if you think that will help you.</li> <li>• You can search for more information on other resources.</li> </ul>
HOW?	By producing any type of digital media: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report your findings and examples of the use of phrasal verbs.</li> <li>• mention other resources used.</li> </ul>

**A Note about Assessment**

Together with these tasks, conversational feedback adds a formative assessment process to the learning process. A single-point rubric was designed to provide specific and constructive details about learners' strengths and areas that could be strengthened. Either as peer or teacher feedback, the rubrics provide a space to assess performance. The criteria in the center may be adaptable to the course and program's linguistic goals. Criteria follow three desired characteristics for levels of performance (Brookhart, 2013). These criteria need to be descriptive (what is observed in the task), clear (students and instructor understand what the descriptions mean) and centered on the target performance. In the particular case of this approach, a single-point rubric works well since it is rooted in the idea that descriptive feedback is more helpful than a number (Fluckiger, 2010). In fact, the conversational tone of this rubric reinforces UDL assessment principles that expect learners to develop metacognitive awareness since the rubric requires reflection and a deeper understanding of the criteria. In this case, students would need to understand what it is they are learning, what good examples look like, and what the expectations are (Katz, 2012).

FORMATIVE FEEDBACK			
Please provide specific, constructive feedback about what was strong and what can be strengthened.			
Areas to strengthen	Criteria (performance standard)	What is already strong	What went beyond the criteria
	<b>Task Elements</b> The report achieved the purpose of the task by including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high quality digital media.</li> <li>• examples of findings on the use of irregular verbs.</li> <li>• descriptions of other resources used.</li> </ul>		
	<b>Task Structure</b> The report was well-organized and easy to understand.		
	<b>Language</b> The presenter used correct/appropriate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language for the topic.</li> <li>• sentence. structure/syntax</li> <li>• pronunciation.</li> <li>• vocabulary.</li> <li>• examples of irregular verbs.</li> </ul>		

Rubric adapted from Fluckiger (2010).

**Conclusion**

The implementation of these learning tasks comes with challenges. However, by identifying the challenges, language instructors can adjust the tasks accordingly. Constant technological change, a set syllabus, and

time constraints are three common barriers faced in teaching and learning practices. Because social networks are continually changing, language instructors implementing this approach should be flexible and aware of the constant updates and trends in social networks. Listening to students' preferences is also key. They are the best sources of information. In addition, dealing with a non-flexible syllabus and program may pose a challenge as well. It is important for instructors to follow a critical analysis of the decisions made in classrooms. Language instructors should be mindful about their accountability for providing and promoting authentic practices that, at the end of the road, ensure learners develop the necessary skills to cope with real communication outside the classroom. Focusing only on the topics, the tests, and the final product in the form of a score, limits practices to the classroom walls that are artificial by nature. Lastly, much of the difficulty and instructors' own doubts to try new techniques, stem from time limits. These tasks are useful as they can be assigned as homework and students can take as much time as required. These UDL tasks provide a set of steps within a flexible time frame giving language instructors the opportunity to devote as much or as little time to their lessons as their context permits.

We can also conclude that there is a need for effective assessment in the form of oral feedback that match students' proficiency levels, time allowed for the process, focus of the tasks and the tone of these criteria. Following conversational feedback assists learners' language development and allows instructors to check for understanding (Brookhart, 2008). As Brookhart (2013) suggested, rubrics are the best way to assess performance. An important reminder is that learners' performance is not the learning outcomes but the indicators of their process. Feedback can take many forms. Rubrics, checklists and rating scales, all benefit learning in as much as they clarify the qualities of the task.

### Final Thoughts

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is no doubt an adventurous field of endeavor. EFL instructors, need to always be ready for the unexpected and never conform to established patterns. Changes and updates in teaching and learning methodology, language use, information networks, and even socio-political decisions influence our day-to-day classroom practices. Instructors need to be courageous, flexible, and ready for change and transformation. They should never feel too comfortable with their practices because the history of language teaching has shown dramatic benefits through drastic moves. Being attuned with social changes and open to new practices should drive classroom experiences. Rooted in the fact that technological advancements have marked the last decades of existing practices, teaching should reflect learners' social demands and reality. Only then can English language instructors catch up with this ever-changing world.

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