THE XENO-TOLERANCE PROJECT- A USEFUL TOOL IN DOING QUALITY RESEARCH

Anca COLIBABA[1], Stefan COLIBABA, Irina GHEORGHIU, Cintia COLIBABA, Claudia DINU, Ovidiu URSA

e-mail:acolib@euroed.ro

Abstract

The article presents some ideas promoted by the European project Xeno-tolerance 2015-1-FR01-KA202-015143 as they were implemented by EuroEd Foundation Iasi. The paper narrows down the project's ambitious goal (prevention and fight against radicalisation) to one aspect where any student may be vulnerable: the authenticity and credibility of internet resources and databases. The experiment carried out on students (studying medicine and oenology) familiarised them with the criteria they could apply in assessing the credibility of websites they often use when doing research on the internet. It also helped them distinguish between facts and opinions. This ability enhanced their chances to distinguish opinion from informationwhich sometimes aims at manipulating readers' opinions. The activities suggested enabled students not only to enrich their vocabulary and practise language structures in the target language but also to diagnose the social realities of the environment, detect unauthentic sources, evaluate and select the most adequate resources, including social media.

Key words: research, students, criteria, internet, credibility

Introduction. Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman holds that most of people's opinions, even if they consider themselves to be independent thinkers, appear and develop in the groups they share common points with in terms of their education, communities, religion, and even science(Kahneman D., 2015). Personal security is based on shared ideas; when one sees news supporting their beliefs, they feel safe and comfortable and tend to categorise it as real news. On the other hand, if the news opposes one's views, people are taken out of their comfort zone and tend to call it "fake news" without even reading the arguments and evidence justifying the opinions. The case has become even more problematic with online information, where information is split into bits and promoted as such by several sources; Daniel Kahneman says that even if people admit to their biases they find it difficult to discern real from fake information because of too much information which comes in numerous fragments without giving the whole picture (Kahneman D., 2015). As a result, more and more people fall easy prey to websites promoting fight for noble causes but which in reality hide extremist views. The European project Allo-Tolerance (2015-1-FR01-KA202-015143), which is co-financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ programme, focuses on radicalisation, raises people's awareness about the issue and offers teachers and trainers tools to help them identify and deal with risk situations by providing solid support in multicultural and intercultural education (Colibaba A., 2016

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The AlloTolerance project suggests teaching techniques which may help one counteract the tendency to construct "truth" out of comfort, convenience, and confusion. Young people are especially vulnerable when it comes to the authenticity and credibility of internet resources and databases, which they use when doing research on the internet.

The experiment described below was carried out on students (studying medicine and oenology) during their foreign language courses. The activities familiarised students with the criteria they could apply in assessing the credibility of websites they often use when doing research on the internet. They also helped them distinguish between facts and opinions or fake vs real information. This ability enhanced their chances to detect opinion from information which sometimes aims at manipulating readers' opinions. The experiment aimed at enabling students to:
- evaluate the credibility and reliability of websites

[1] Euroed, Iasi

- rate sites by applying the criteria
- evaluate sources, including social media
- develop media literacy skills.

In order to enhance students' participation in the course, interactive strategies were used such as role play and games. The experiment was based on the following scenario:

The teacher asks students what sites they usually visit and why. Then she asks them if they know whether the sites are reliable or not and what criteria they use if any.The teacher sets students in groups and asks them to negotiate and write down their group criteria in selecting sites (when they have to do research for a school project); after that she gives them some official criteria in the form of questions.

1. Who created the site? Do they have expertise? Do you find any information about them on the internet? Do they give any information details about their institution or organisation?

2. Is there a link back to the institutional or organizational home page? If you go to the 'about' section, how do they describe themselves?

3. Is the site stable, well-designed, well-written and grammatically correct?

4. Do they provide a bibliography with any sources cited and if they do, are the sources reliable and can they be identified elsewhere?

5. Is the information given accurate, documented or well-researched? Is the information hyperlinked to other quality sources?

6. Is the information current? Can you verify when it was published?

7. Do they have a contact section whose email address matches the domain? (Kent State University, 2017)

The teacher asks students to compare their group criteria with these and then complete their own list of criteria. Each group discusses each list with the class. Each group has to present their arguments and justification for each choice.The teacher brainstorms students about topics of interest and negotiate on one (related to their field). Then the teacher sets a group task: students (groups of four) are asked to do research on the chosen topicon the internet, find four sites related to the topic and decide whether they are reliable or fake according to the criteria agreed upon. Students present their findings (supported by arguments) to the class. The groups discuss how they did the task (search for sites, analysis of the sites,use of criteria, etc).

After the students have identified the most important aspects they have to consider when assessing the credibility of a site (the author's name, contact, qualifications or credentials, whether the information is useful, up to date and suitable for their age), they discuss how and where they can find this information about the site. The groups discuss the necessity and the role of the criteria, benefits in using them and the dangers in not relying on them. (Schulten, K. amd Brown, A., 2017).

Starting from the statement that information may be fact or opinion, the teacher asks students how they discern factual information from opinion or fiction. How do they distinguish between facts and opinions? Why is this important? What is fact? What is opinion?

The teacher gives students examples of facts and opinions. This will enable them to detect opinion from facts. It is also important to help learners to make the difference between opinions that are constructive and opinions that aim at manipulating the information.

The teacher asks students in groups to examine the sentences given and focus on the characteristics of the language used in factual and opinion news.

Suggestions:phrases: I think, I believe, It seems, It appears; modals: should, may, etc.; opinion adjectives: awesome, awful, interesting, boring etc.; opinion/view point/commenting adverbs: clearly, obviously, presumably, personally etc.; selecting or highlighting information.

The teacher engages students in the Auction game with a view to consolidating the main linguistic features used in factual and opinion news. She initiates the game by talking about auctions in general, as acreative framework for the learning process: Do you know what they are? Can you describe an auction? Have you ever been to an auction? Then the teacher sets students into pairs or small groups and displays 12 statements with factual and opinion information on the screen such as:

1.Viticulture and oenology combines the study of cultivating juice and wine grapes with the study of wines and winemaking.
2.Temperature is a limiting factor and defines the distribution area for all plants.
3.It seems that when the ecoclimatic conditions from the studied vineyards are favourable, the production of both red and white wines are of high quality in these areas.
4.I think grapevine is the most important fruit crop in the world.

Each pair or group is given some 'money' with which to bid on the statements displayed.The teacher explains the rules of the auction game: The aim of the game is to buy as many sentences with factual information as possible. Each group will have "100 euros" to spend.The sentence will be sold to the highest bidder (Use the structures: "10 euros going once, 10 euros going twice, 10 euros sold to group X!"). The winner of the game is the group which has bought the most factual sentences. The teacher asks the students to plan which sentences they are going to bid for and conducts the auction in an attractive way. After all the sentences are sold, the teacher runs through them again and gets a class vote on which sentences are facts. She also confirms the answers. The teacher asks students to add up their money. Who has lost money on opinion sentences?

Debriefing and following up:The teacher and students review what was understood and learned. (What did you learn? What do you still have questions about? What was the most interesting thing you learnt from this activity?)The teacher also initiates a discussion about benefits and risks of the internet, where positive messages are reinforced andstudents are encouraged to think critically about current situations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To obtain feedback on the experiment, a questionnaire was carried out on 40 students from the School of Medicine and Viticulture and Oenology University in Iasi, who studied English at the intermediate level. The students filled in the questionnaire during their classes with their tutors. The items of the questionnaire explored general attitudes of participants towards the proposed programme,its usefulness and benefits.

In the first part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to describe their attitudes towards the experience. Most students said they had positive feelings during the seminars (enthusiastic, interested or happy). Only four students admitted experiencing lack of satisfaction and frustration due to their inability to fully participate in the seminar (caused by their low level of the language). No respondent reported having felt bored. "The topic engaged us into the activities from the very beginning". "The authenticity of the topic made us listen to one another, communicate, negotiate and work with colleagues in a very pleasant atmosphere".

In their comments students often compared traditional library research with internet research. "It is true that there is an increase in the use of the internet when doing research for their assignments. The internet differs a lot from traditional library research. It is comfortable and very generous in its offer but it is not safe. It must be used carefully and critically". Ignoring or not being aware of these differences may lead students to problems, which some of them are aware of: "you have to pay close attention when doing research online as anyone can put anything they want on a web site". Everybody agreed that it is easy to find reliable information if the source is known. "There are lots of academic resources available on the internet; a university online library is one example. If you use the material from those sources is ok; it's a reliable online library". Otherwise students need tips or even training embedded in the school curricula to raise their awareness about certain risks and help them make the right choice. The lessons they got from the programme helped them in this respect. "The key to the whole process is to think critically about what you find on the internet; if you want to use it, you are responsible for ensuring that it is reliable and accurate".

The students were also asked to express their opinions about the experience in terms of its usefulness and benefits.There were lots of gains that students mentioned: "Knowing the source and its biases and interests, can protect students from acting on false information". "Knowing where information comes from can tell you a lot about what you are supposedto believe". Most of the students appreciated the programmefor helping them improve their critical thinking skills; they had "invaluable lessons in questioning and inquiring (as opposed to passively receiving information and ideas from others)", looking into evidence to explore a situation, opinion or message and "investigating opinions different from their own and learning to be open to accept them". They felt these "skills helped them in their development as independent, informed and reasonable thinkers". The activities taught young people to "explore the evidence given in the news until they got the primary evidence"; students also highlighted the benefits they got from being equipped with "the knowledge and skills which enabled to recognise when and how a message is trying to manipulate them".

All students were of the opinion that materials found on the web may be inaccurate and biased because there are very few regulations as to what a person can and cannot publish and most of these rules are locally based. Responsible Internet research based on solid knowledge of the tools and techniques makes this process more reliable. Whether we like it or not, the internet has become an important source (even though a supplementary one), which should not be disregarded when conducting academic research.

The students stated that they were positively impressed by complete and thorough instruments offered by the project, which can help young people use the internet safely, providing a helpful basis to detect biases, minimising potential risks.

They hope that the project won't remain contextualised in such crucial, yet specific area of action, but will grow in visibility, address a wider audience and eventually set a method of operation for the benefit of the community at a broader level. The project may even attract new supporting partners (investors and educational institutes and, why not, other individuals such as passionate teachers, trainers or parents etc.) as the kit offers a range of awareness raising, training and demonstration materials for VET teachers and for

practitioners working with teenagers at risk of exclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research has shown firstly that students are motivated in engaging themselves to improve both their professional skills and language competence in a foreign language by using new techniques. The experiment carried out on students (studying medicine and oenology) familiarised them with the criteria they could apply in assessing the credibility of websites they often use when doing research on the internet. It also helped them distinguish between online facts and opinions. Evaluating information on the Internet is complex and requires a number of skills, which are acquired in time and through practice: critical thinking, the ability to scan through information quickly, the ability to grasp and notice the essential in the information, in-depth reading, a sense of good judgment and common sense.

These skills help students move beyond stereotypes and judge individuals or situations more accurately. They can support young people to develop their views independently, to challenge pre-conceptions and understand the complex nature of geo-political conflicts. As teaching methods based on written texts are often perceived as dry by young people the present paper suggests several techniques and strategies which make information more accessible and memorable:

combining textual analysis with debate and dialogue; encouraging personal reflection on the content of the text, or using small group work against a competitive background,having students support each other.The activities suggested enabled students not only to enrich their vocabulary and practise language structures in the target language but also to diagnose the social realities of the environment, detect unauthentic sources, evaluate and select the most adequate resources, including social media.

REFERENCES

Colibaba, A., 2016. XENO-TOLERANCE –Research findings on cultural diversity and inclusive learning in Romania.In: Proceedings of the ICERI Conference, 2016

Kahneman D., **2015.** Gandire rapida, gandire lenta, Editura: Publica, Kent State University, Kent University, Criteria for Evaluating Web Resources, available on-line at: http://www.library.kent.edu/criteria-evaluating-web-resources (01.07.2017)

MacDonald, B.W., Steele J.,.2017. Research Using the Internet, available on-line at: http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/researching/research-using-internet/ (01.07.2017)

Schulten K., **Brown A.**, **2017**. *Evaluating Sources in a 'Post-Truth' World: Ideas for Teaching and* Learning About Fake News, available on-line at:https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/learning/lesson-plans/evaluating-sources-in-a-post-truth-world-ideas-for-teaching-and-learning-about-fake-news.html (01.07.2017)