Personalizing English Learning with Pinterest

Andrew Wilbur  
Seoul National University

Laura Francescangeli  
Woosong University

Introduction

The proliferation of affordable communication technology, combined with the temporo-spatial reach of social media, enables unprecedented collaboration opportunities and affinity associations between users of such technologies. Schools and universities, suggest Walker and White (2013, p. 1), “feel pressure to invest in technology if and when they can afford it”, but the educational value of certain implementations is very much an ongoing debate. One concern involves an apparent conflict between formal and informal styles of learning, to which we can add an additional anxiety about collective vs. individual progress. In the English classroom, these questions are useful guides for developing course materials that incorporate specific technologies, especially those designed for purposes extrinsic to formal education. Drawing on our classroom experiences with South Korean university students, this paper will focus on personalization of learning through the use of Pinterest, an image sharing website and application.

We refer to what follows as a pilot study to suggest that its structure and content should not be considered fixed for future use. Instead, we developed this with little evidential insight as to how it would work in the classroom, with the intention of adapting the project for future iterations after receiving student feedback. Based on the experience of delivering the lessons to six unique peer groups over three semesters, we conclude that several aspects of the project can be preserved, and are indeed quite successful for stimulating student interest, encouraging original and diverse end products, and demonstrating the acquisition of new vocabulary. These include thematic image searching and organizing, curation of images for a virtual exhibition and an oral-visual presentation based on the results of exploring images with Pinterest. Nevertheless, we recommend some modifications to the project for certain contexts, particularly related to its appropriateness for particular student groups, ability levels or class types.

Functionality and Educational Potential of Pinterest

Pinterest is a free popular social networking website and mobile application that collates and organizes pre-existing online images and original uploads from its users, or “pinners”. In the company’s own words, Pinterest is best understood as a “visual discovery engine” (Pinterest, 2020). Based in California, the
company claims that the platform boasts more than 300 million monthly users, more than half of which are located outside the USA. Images within the platform’s database now total over 200 billion, resulting in an enormous supply of searchable content. Videos and animated GIF visuals are also available on Pinterest for the purpose of collecting and sharing, or repurposing media content within an application and making it available to other users. Pinterest usage revolves around a virtual ‘pin board’ that resembles a physical bulletin board with images displayed as “pins”. Pinners collect visual ideas and then upload them to the site to be documented. Pins can also directly link to websites outside of Pinterest.

To get started, users must create a profile page and start making pin boards from a particular inspiration theme, using images from websites and others already available on Pinterest. Users then categorize their board themes, and can also add sub-sections to main boards. For example, a main board with the user-generated theme ‘Books to Read’ could have subsections such as ‘Fiction’ or ‘Poetry’. Users are also prompted to start ‘following’ five initial boards from others pinners in order to start seeing pins in their home feed. Users will rapidly generate a lot of imagery and information from following these boards, which in turn contributes to their own collections of pins. Once an image feed is created a user can start pinning, curating and creating personal boards which can be set to public or private. There is no inbuilt camera mode with this particular app, but uploading original imagery is encouraged alongside pinning and sharing images found within the site, or pinned from external websites and mobile apps. Pinterest offers some of the same aspects of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, though the style of commenting is notably different. Unlike the free-form communication styles of Facebook or Twitter, for example, pinners typically make comments to positively portray what they are sharing, as well as identifying and labelling characteristics of a particular pin; thus, comments are predominantly promotional. Scolere and Humphreys (2016) are careful to note, however, that “pin etiquette” (made explicit by Pinterest and recognized by their study’s participants) directs individual users to avoid excessive self-promotion, focusing instead on displaying the work of others.

Digital marketers have long realized the potential that Pinterest holds for brand visibility, and according to marketing company Omnicore, about 2/3 of pins feature brands or products (Aslam, 2020). The company’s own promotional materials are strongly directed toward companies seeking to exploit the potential of Pinterest as a marketing platform. This commercial focus understandably overshadows other potential uses for Pinterest, including its utility as an educational tool. However, we suggest that language teachers and researchers might view Pinterest from a different angle, noting its value in creating a personalized user profile for learners, allowing them to incrementally build vocabulary, conduct independent research, establish meaning through context and organize information for formal presentations through Pinterest’s image-based visual cues.

**Personalized Learning and Technology**

Recent work by Trinder (2017) suggests that English learners who use technology in everyday life naturally sift and filter resources that they consider useful or engaging, quickly dismissing or abandoning those seen to be of little value. With virtually unlimited content available online and innumerable apps for accessing and recycling multimedia, this practice mirrors habits independent of language learning. However, given that this is how digital information is typically processed and consumed, educators have been grappling with methods for replicating this process in an educational context. Godwin-Jones (2017, p. 8) notes that generating “personal profiles or learner models can enable filtering of content so as to direct learners to resources likely to be most appropriate for their proficiency levels, learning goals and content preferences.” Such a filtering system is effectively built in to a platform such as Pinterest in the form of thematically organized boards and sections within boards. Mandating that students filter and organize their Pinterest content, rather than passively accept content provided by the teacher, promotes “an active learning environment… where students are not just observers but [are] involved in the search for and evaluation of relevant material.” (Schmidt, 2016. p. 80) Schmidt (2016), for example, uses
Pinterest in his university Management courses to encourage students to find their own relevant content, share it with other students, and then evaluate and comment on the content provided by other classmates. This technique, he suggests, allows students to determine what content is relevant or useful, discuss why that might be the case, and refine their topical discourse accordingly. This multi-tiered level of engagement reflects one form of Moreno and Mayer’s (2000) “personalization” concept, wherein “self-referencing” (i.e., through a personal, customized Pinterest account) and familiar, informal methods of input improve both retention and application of learning across varied contexts.

Trinder (2017) has studied how technology has been increasingly integrated into everyday life as an informal method of learning, often superseding the importance of formal instructional tools in the process. For example, her survey of English learners in Austria indicated a low usage rate of intentional technological tools such as online grammar resources and language learning websites, while participants nonetheless communicated in English on social media and consumed English-language TV/radio/video clips on a daily or “frequent” basis. Trinder (2017, p. 408) describes informal learning thusly: “it is learner-(or peer-) rather than teacher-initiated, takes place outside class, and combines other goals (entertainment, information search, communication) with language acquisition.” This correlates to Godwin-Jones’ (2015, p. 15) claim that “even with specific guidelines from teachers, students tend to find their own ways to use provided tools and services” and, in some cases, “may find the use of familiar online tools and services unacceptable in the context of formal language learning instruction.” He notes, however, that research shows that language learning success can be achieved with such tools, provided that such learning is integrated into everyday practices.

This creates something of a conundrum for using certain technologies in a classroom environment, where some formal instruction is an expected part of teacher-student interaction, but existing data supports more effective use of such technologies in an informal, autonomous capacity. Some recent literature surrounding technology in the English classroom therefore reflects attempts to promote personalization and learner autonomy while retaining some control over curriculum design and learning outcomes. Instructors such as Schmidt (2016) and Han (2019, p. 34) have devised projects that assign students “the role of researchers, responsible for guiding other audiences” and practicing “not only language skills, but also learner agency” by sharing “resources, tools and strategies with each other.” Our own experimentation with Pinterest in English classes at a Korean university reflects another attempt to explore personalization and autonomy while maintaining a clear sense of direction in the classroom.

Methods and Learning Context

This project was implemented in six classes over three semesters at a university in Seoul, South Korea, between March 2018 and December, 2019. The students were all placed into a Level 1 English course, classified as intermediate. The university offers more remedial English classes taught in Korean, as well as Level 2 and Advanced classes for students with higher standardized test scores. The participating students are therefore broadly capable of taking a class taught exclusively in English but are not considered among the highest performers in their educational cohort. In total, 111 students participated in this study, which was carried out across two 75-minute class periods for each individual class. At the end of the second period, the students were required to complete a reflective survey about their experiences.

We assumed a minimal amount of student engagement with Pinterest prior to these class sessions, but took an informal poll of how many students had Pinterest accounts or were active users of the app. In each class, at least a few students were familiar with Pinterest but they were always a small minority. Therefore, it was essential to provide each class with a demonstration of the Pinterest website, showing students how to navigate the website and locate the features that they would use for this project. Students were then divided into four or five groups, depending on the class size, and one member of each group set up or used an existing Pinterest account.
The basic premise of the lesson involved assembling and presenting a “virtual exhibition” about a topic of the students’ own choosing. Participants worked together in groups to assemble initial content, narrow their field of interest, choose a location and theme for their exhibition, perform research on the broad theme and exhibition items, then make an oral-visual presentation to the rest of the class. Students were given practice in navigating Pinterest, searching for images (pins) and categorizing their pins in the first exercise. This step and all subsequent procedures are outlined below, as written in the lesson materials given to students.

| Lesson plan |
|-------------|
| 1. Create a new board called “Museum / Gallery”  
  a. Pin 10 images from galleries or museums that you would like to visit  
  2. Choose one gallery or museum from your board  
  a. Create a board section and give it a name (i.e. Sydney Car Museum)  
  i. Take 5 minutes to pin some images related to the museum to this section (i.e., the building, internal galleries, advertisements, exhibition materials)  
  3. Introduce your museum to the class: Where is it? What is its specialty? Why does it interest you?  
  4. Create 2-3 new theme sections, and pin some images that relate to the specialty of your museum (i.e. Vintage Cars, Flying Cars, Super Cars)  
  5. You will now curate an exhibition for the museum that you chose.  
  a. Look at your section boards for inspiration.  
  b. Choose a theme for an exhibition that you would like to see at your museum.  
  c. Create a new board with the title of your exhibition and a description  
  i. Example Title: Vintage Cars from Europe, 1920-1939  
  ii. Example Description: A collection of early European automobiles, manufactured between 1920 and 1939.  
  6. As you curate an exhibition of 15-20 images…  
  a. Take notes about any new vocabulary, or new meanings for familiar words  
  b. Make sure that you get enough information about significant images, so that you can make a presentation about your exhibition  
  7. Finally, each group will present its exhibition to the class. You will mostly talk about the images, but you also need to introduce the museum and the exhibition theme. |

**Figure 1.** Board sections for horror movie poster exhibition.
Figure 1 shows an example of three board sections created by a student group. One section contains images from a real horror museum in the USA, which the students chose as the destination for their virtual exhibition. The two theme sections explore horror movie posters and zombies. This group ultimately chose to present a virtual exhibition about horror movie posters.

Figure 2 reveals another group’s virtual exhibition, related to the history of World Cup soccer ball design, “hosted” at the FIFA World Football Museum in Zurich, Switzerland.

**Survey Results**

The survey was designed to elicit feedback about students’ experience with Pinterest, focusing specifically on: 1) its effectiveness as a tool for adopting and expanding English vocabulary; 2) its attractiveness as a method of personalizing English study; and 3) how user-friendly it is as a classroom tool. These questions were foregrounded in a couple of more basic evaluations of the project that rated its general difficulty and the quality of the teacher’s instruction. Regarding the former, responses were evenly balanced in the middle. On a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being “Easy” and 5 being “Hard”, 48% of students rated the difficulty as “3”, with the remaining numbers tilting slightly toward “Easy” (32% for “1” and “2” combined, and 28% for “4” and “5” combined). Rating the quality of the teacher’s input, 82% of students commented that “it was enough, and it was helpful” while 13% expressed that more help could have been offered, and 5% had no opinion.

Pinterest was generally viewed positively by students as a useful learning tool. A small majority (52%) thought that Pinterest would be “useful for researching other topics in English class” and a combined 58% felt that it was “more effective than” or “similarly effective to” a search engine for researching the group’s topic. Predictably, many of the new vocabulary words that students absorbed were related to art, museums and curation, which suggests that Pinterest, and this style of lesson, could be especially valuable in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, particularly for art students or workers in art, design and culture industries. The word cloud below (Figure 3) reveals the new vocabulary noted by the participating students.
Discussion

As previously stated, this pilot project was performed in a general English class, where ability levels were determined by the students’ placement within a range of standardized test scores. Our subjective take on the students’ ability levels, gleaned through frequent classroom interaction, would suggest a much more mixed range than the test scores would imply. These discrepancies can be brought into relief by a project such as this, which requires students to work cooperatively in groups, prepare research around topics that may be unfamiliar to some group members and, finally, present their work. We gave each group control, in terms of roles and responsibilities, over the organization of their final presentations. Rather predictably, they were quite often dominated by students who had previously stood out as particularly outgoing or confident in their English use. Quieter and ostensibly less confident students noticeably took more background roles. This self-sorting tendency could quite easily be rectified by assigning a speaking role to each member of the group, though this may not be necessary in a more advanced class with greater consistency of L2 ability. Somewhat related is the problem of “freeriding” students who contribute little to a group’s efforts yet take credit for the end result. This phenomenon is by no means exclusive to this type of project, nor was it noticeable in the actual classroom setting. Nevertheless, at least two students in separate classes used the survey to comment on their frustrations with this occurring in their respective groups.

Based on student feedback and our perceptions of the students’ work practices, a strong case could be made for adapting this project to smaller, more advanced classes, wherein students would create individual pinboards and presentations. Individualized work would also strengthen the element of L2 personalization which serves as the pedagogical foundation of this project. We did acknowledge the apparent contradiction of using a group project as the basis for personalization before implementing it in the classroom, and after completing this pilot phase, would suggest that such concerns are well-founded, though not necessarily fatal to some of the project’s aims, such as teaching new vocabulary and improving presentation skills.

Because final oral presentations constitute the Pinterest project’s most cohesive end product, connecting the different stages of students’ work and allowing them to demonstrate English skills in a straightforward manner, we suggest that it may provide a novel format for a specialized presentation or speech class. The research skills are somewhat different to those of a typical academic presentation, relying initially on visual rather than textual cues, and the presentation style is, by design, rather freeform. Groups were advised to choose a representative sample of their pins and discuss them as if they were introducing their “exhibition” to an unfamiliar audience. This left considerable room for creativity and flexible presenting styles, using images as prompts for discussion of the exhibition’s themes along with details about individual images. Unfortunately, however, Pinterest lacks anything like the “Slideshow”
function of presentation software, and therefore the visual display of individual images in sequence was rather awkward for many groups. A feature permitting users to enlarge images and display in sequence would be a welcome addition to Pinterest’s interface, albeit one for which there is possibly little demand. Nearly 90% of students had a favourable opinion of this presentation style, though about half that number acknowledged that the lack of a prescribed structure did make the presentation more difficult. Roughly 7% suggested that they would have preferred a more structured format, with one answering affirmatively to the prompt “It was difficult and I felt lost.” It would be reasonable to infer that the more negative responses to the presentation style may reflect some of the problems that have already been noted; again, this would strengthen the case for using this lesson in a more specialized or advanced English class.

Conclusion

Pinterest has become a common communication medium in digital social life, while remaining relatively underexamined as a learning tool. The visual nature of the platform prompts students to match images with explanatory language, promoting the acquisition of new vocabulary and the organisation of abstract ideas into coherent frameworks. Students’ positive responses to this project – namely, in regard to Pinterest’s ease of use and its effectiveness as a learning tool – indicate that developing curricula with Pinterest or a similar image-sharing platform could have a positive effect on learner motivation. Furthermore, as we intended to demonstrate, Pinterest allows students to perform a relatively deep exploration of a given topic within a restricted time frame. We would argue that this establishes the platform’s potential for personalized learning, wherein a student of English can develop and sustain an interest in an individual subject area, improving their language skills through repeated and frequent L2 exposure.

The implementation of our pilot project in a mixed-ability general English class brought into relief some of Pinterest’s most valuable potential as well as some of its shortcomings. We are acutely aware of the fact that performing this as a group project mitigated against a highly individualized style of learning. On the other hand, the “virtual exhibition” and oral presentation required students to utilise multiple L2 skills that could be expanded and strengthened through some adjustments to the lesson plan and/or learning context. As we have already suggested, a version of this project might be more advisable in a specialised EFL class, such as EAP for art students or advanced presentation skills. Furthermore, a smaller class size might allow for individual “exhibitions”, which would arguably go a long way toward strengthening the benefits of personalised learning. In a context such as the specialised ones mentioned above, we would consider expanding this project across a much longer time frame, promoting a deep engagement with the students’ subjects and, ideally, a thoroughly researched and carefully curated final presentation.

Pinterest’s content organisation features, combined with an ability to share images and boards between other users, give it a particular advantage in the classroom. The process of assembling content, organizing it into coherent themes and noting new vocabulary results in an individualized learning experience for each student, one that promotes continual engagement with the subject matter. Future experiments with Pinterest could involve vocabulary retention or subject comprehension tests, or explorations into how sharing content can engender autonomous learning. The results of this pilot project suggest that there is a significant potential for Pinterest as a tool for English language teaching. As a free platform with virtually infinite content, the accessibility and scope of Pinterest make it ideal for students to begin exploring a personalized topic of their choice.
The Authors

Dr. Andrew Wilbur is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Faculty of Liberal Education at Seoul National University.

College English Program
Faculty of Liberal Education
Gwanak-ro 1-gil, Gwanak-gu,
Seoul, South Korea 08826
Email: awilbur@snu.ac.kr

Laura Francescangeli (corresponding author) is a recent graduate of Woosong University’s TESOL-MALL MA program.

Woosong University Graduate School of TESOL-MALL
196-5 Jayang-dong, Dong-gu
Daejeon, South Korea 300781
Email: laurafrancescangeli@rocketmail.com

References

Aslam, S. (2020, July 29) Pinterest by the numbers: Stats, demographics & fun facts. Retrieved from https://www.omnicoreagency.com/pinterest-statistics/

Han, Y. (2019) Exploring multimedia, mobile learning, and place-based learning in linguacultural education. Language Learning & Technology, 23(3), 29-38. http://hdl.handle.net/10125/44692

Godwin-Jones, R. (2015) Contributing, creating, curating: Digital literacies for language learners. Language Learning & Technology, 19(3), 8-20. http://dx.doi.org/10125/44427

Godwin-Jones, R. (2017) Scaling up and zooming in: Big data and personalization in language learning. Language Learning & Technology, 21(1), 4-15. https://dx.doi.org/10125/44592

Moreno, R., & Mayer, R. (2000) Engaging students in active learning: The case for personalized multimedia messages. Journal of Educational Psychology, 92(4), 724-733. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.92.4.724

Pinterest (n.d.). All about Pinterest. Retrieved May 5, 2020, from https://help.pinterest.com/en/guide/all-about-pinterest

Scolere, L., & Humphreys, L. (2016) Pinning design: The curatorial labor of creative professionals. Social Media + Society, 2(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116633481

Schmidt, G. (2016) Using Pinterest in the management classroom. Management Teaching Review, 1(2), 79-84. https://doi.org/10.1177/2379298116634737

Trinder, R. (2017) Informal and deliberate learning with new technologies. ELT Journal, 71(4), 401-412. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccc117

Walker, A., & White, G. (2013) Technology enhanced language learning: Connecting theory and practice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Received January 06, 2021; Revised February 20, 2021; Accepted March 10, 2021)