

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: A STUDY IN ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

Nowadays, social media are dominating the life of people. Facebook has become noticeably widespread among the youth, and students in particular. Research has indicated that Facebook could be an effective platform for language learning. This study, therefore, comes to explore the effects of Facebook-assisted teaching on learning English for specific purposes by students at the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. A sample of 64 students from the Faculty of Business Administration, taking a Business Letters course in English, were divided into a Facebook-tutored group and a traditional classroom tutored group and were given the same vocabulary content. The two groups were given pre- and post-tests to measure their vocabulary learning, and were subjected to an interview to gauge their attitudes towards the instructional methods which were put to use. However, no significant difference between the two groups was found in terms of achievement in spite of the positive response and the high satisfaction level the Facebook-tutored students showed towards the use of such a platform.

Keywords: social media; Facebook; English language learning

1. Introduction

In the recent years, information technologies and social media, in particular, have affected the life of Saudis, in general, and the educational community in particular. It is due to their different forms which help people communicate in various ways: such as blogs, social networks (Facebook), microblogs (Twitter), wikis (Wikipedia), video podcasts, and photo sharing (Instagram and Snapchat). Such applications as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp have massively boosted social interaction and information sharing within student and teacher communities alike. The reason behind this expansion might well be the human craving for discovery, boundless connection and exchange of information and opinion with other users with the same interests. Social media applications allow users to cross the boundaries of their countries, connect and express themselves on a global scale (Thorne, 2010).

It follows that the possibilities offered by social media nowadays could also be linguistically rewarding for users, be they students or educators, as these media interactions are bound to take place either within the same linguistic communities or across different ones. Facebook, as one of those media, has been globally ranked as one of the most used social platforms ever created with 1.86 billion users (facebook.com). It has come to yield unprecedented opportunities for foreign language teachers and learners alike, as it offers them the possibility to exchange limitless numbers of text messages, images, and videos. Such options can give those users and language learners, in particular, the opportunity to practice with new texts and learn new vocabulary through interaction, especially if it extends over time. As regards educators, they can benefit from Facebook by using it as a platform to post different kinds of materials (texts, images, graphs, and video), to be worked upon, edited, added to and shared among their students to attain intended objectives. Hence, the teaching experience can be more accessible and centered around students, as more room is given to learners to collaborate and an atmosphere of conviviality and creativity is enhanced among them (Selwyn, 2012).

The research interest in Facebook is growing due to its increasing popularity and the possibilities it gives teachers and students to share information and learn from each other. Facebook remains the most popular social network, accounting for 71% of Internet users (Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016). It has about 1.8 billion users around the world and 14 million users in Saudi Arabia, 7 million of whom are aged between 18 and 29 (www.globalmediainsight.com). This considerable figure can be ascribed to the possibilities Facebook provides for its users to share a large amount of data and communicate with friends. Besides, Facebook allows its users to send and receive prompt messages and mail and is an efficient means of information sharing, socialization, and adaptation to university life among students and instructors (Roblyer et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2010; Bowers-Campbell, 2008). In the same vein, Blattner and Fiori (2009) found that Facebook helped students improve their socio-pragmatic competence. Lee (2006) argues that Facebook use enhanced students' oral proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, and syntactic complexity in the Korean language. Derakshan and Hasanabbasi (2015) claims that Facebook promoted students' communication and language skills. Yet, studies on the impact of Facebook on Arab students' English language acquisition, especially in KSA, are still rare and the existing ones remain too general as they do not focus on specific language areas. This should give us the legitimacy to embark on a study that would focus on the effects of Facebook use on ESP students' achievement in English as a second language, especially in the sphere of vocabulary learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media import and usage at university level

Various studies have dealt with social media availability and the new horizons they have created, especially for the youths (Lin et al., 2016). Out of these media, YouTube and Flickr are used to share visual materials, Facebook and LinkedIn provide social networking, Wikipedia specializes in the development of collaborative knowledge and Twitter in microblogging (Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016). For Lin et al. (2016), social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, not only give users the possibility to generate information but also to share it with other users around the globe.

In view of their proliferation and the possibilities they provide, researchers have called for the use of social media in the field of education (Everson et al., 2013; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010). Balakrishnan and Lay (2016) report that Facebook and YouTube have been used “within and outside classrooms for teaching purposes, such as to upload educational videos or learning materials for students”. Such action has been taken due to the popularity of these media among students who use them to complement and thus enhance their classroom learning due to their ease and speed of communication. Consequently, it can be argued that users’ attitudes depend on medium functionality and students’ environment. Attitude is, in turn, determined by users/students’ learning style. By environment, we mean the opportunities the students have to communicate in English as a second language, which will partly determine their recourse to social media to fulfill their communicative needs within a meaningful setting. As it has been investigated by Chartrand (2012), students who have limited time for real English communication can be encouraged use to the Internet to upgrade their English language communicative skills. As to students’ learning styles, as it is argued here, they partly determine the degree and manner in which those students use social media. Balakrishnan et al. (2015) explore the effect of these styles on their intentions to use social media for learning. More particularly, the researchers studied the causes behind students’ intentions to use social media for learning, as this phenomenon has been gaining ground among university students.

Balakrishnan and Lay (2016) underline the importance of teachers’ awareness of their students’ learning styles and their effect on social media usage. The researchers base their view on the Social Learning Theory (SLT), which posits that learning is most effective when learners are allowed to observe and interact with other learners, as well as form or participate

in small study groups compared to the lecturers' teaching styles (Bandura, 2002; Gong et al., 2014). They argue that "this theory has become popular with the widespread use of social media and mobile technology" (Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016, p. 810). Out of the three types of learning styles – participatory, independent, and collaborative – Balakrishnan et al. (2015) advance that students with a participatory learning style might favor Facebook and YouTube as learning tools as they permit them to acquire information from their peers anywhere and virtually instantaneously. As such, these media can be quite appealing for such a category of students.

Independent learners, too, can benefit from social media, as these students tend to rely on themselves in retrieving information when they can access it, either through Facebook or YouTube. According to Umrani-Khan and Iyer (2009; cited after Balakrishnan and Lay, 2016), such learners tend to prefer independent study, self-paced work, or special projects based on their interests. Besides, the practicality and omnipresence of social media can give them the possibility to decide about their study schedules. As collaborative students are generally extroverts, they are not concerned about anonymity. Hence, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube can facilitate their collaboration and information exchange by providing platforms for their discussions. Therefore, such sites can be successfully exploited to enhance collaborative learning.

2.2. Effects of Facebook use on students' English language skills

With the interaction opportunities Facebook offers its users, it is the embodiment of the social-interactionist approach to language acquisition advocated by Lantolf (2000), in keeping with Vygotsky (1978). Facebook can provide language learners with new prospects of real time cultural and linguistic interchange (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Harrison, 2013). Besides, from an ecological perspective, which views context as fundamental to language learning (van Lier, 2004), thanks to the contextual clues it provides and the conversational features it provides, Facebook can represent ideal sites of language learning. Cain and Policastri (2011), following Gibson (1979), evoke the use of affordances, defined as objects, places, events or things, by students, with the help of their teachers to maximize language learning. In the recent years, affordances have come to be embodied in high-performance mobile devices, which have enhanced connection and interaction features, providing learners with more opportunities of target language contact, thus contributing to the improvement of their academic performance.

One fundamental interaction pre-requisite is the acquisition of target language vocabulary. Sim and Pop (2014) focus on the effects of social media, notably Facebook, in developing students' English vocabulary. Besides, social media were shown to be effective in developing the areas of language production, as proposed by Chartrand (2012). Chartrand argues, following Swain (2007), that production is an integral part of language learning. Chartrand claims that social media can assist students in learning the language through the use of podcasts and videos. In the same vein, Woo et al. (2007) maintain that multimedia materials can enhance students' motivation to learn the language. Kamnoetsin (2014) found that the Facebook platform assisted students in developing their grammar, vocabulary, and writing, as it helped them share information and acquire new knowledge. Moreover, the platform proved to be useful in updating students about modifications regarding their courses, as an online information center. Facebook, therefore, was shown by the above studies to be a useful tool for enhancing language skills such as writing and reading. In writing, users may gain experience through composing various messages, and in reading they have the chance to read a variety of new messages. Thus, they have the opportunity to learn new words in authentic contexts.

2.3. Is social media use beneficial all the time?

While certain researchers and educators lament the scarcity of empirical research which addresses the question of social media as facilitators of language learning (Stevenson & Liu, 2010; Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Zourou, 2012); others have claimed that the use of social media by university students is more harmful than beneficial. Selwyn (2012) argues that social media are not always used for the good cause, i.e., for learning. He cites Selwyn (2009) who found that 95% of Facebook interactions involving UK students were not related to their academic concerns. Instead, the study proved that those students tend to use social media to deal with ordinary subjects. In keeping with Waycott et al. (2005), Nicholas et al. (2009) and Selwyn (2012) advance that students, generally, do not use social media for academic reasons, and that the applications they have recourse to do not match their academic level, as they tend to be simple and therefore do not necessitate high intellectual aptitude.

In the same vein, Tariq et al. (2012) claim that social media use affected negatively Pakistani students' academic achievement, as these students' were drawn towards chatting and subjects that had nothing to do with their education. Akram and Albalawi (2016) found that Facebook distracted Saudi students and therefore negatively affected their concentration and academic achievement. Amidst the above claims and counter claims, the present research

comes to verify if and when social media in general, and Facebook in particular, affect students' achievement at the University of Tabuk, in the area of second language acquisition, particularly that of English vocabulary learning.

3. The study

This upsurge of social media use and the opportunities it has come to offer have urged us to embark on a study that would disclose the effects of social media use on Saudi students' English language achievement. More specifically, the research concerns a population of ESP students at the University of Tabuk, a modern and ambitious university in the north of Saudi Arabia, which has sought to develop its students' competences especially in the area of English language. The area which the present research deems fundamental for students studying business English is the acquisition of specialized vocabulary and terms necessary in their field and crucial for their graduation.

The present research, therefore, will focus mainly on the effects of Facebook use on those students' achievement in the area of English vocabulary acquisition. To verify the effects that Facebook might have on learning, an experimental study was conducted on a sample of students at the Faculty of Business Administration. The sample involved two groups of students; one in the first semester and another in the second semester of the academic year 2016/2017. Each of the groups was itself divided into an experimental group (A) and a control group (B). The two groups took the same course, which is Business Letters. It was assumed that significant differences were to be found between the two groups (A and B) in terms of vocabulary learning; the one which was taught via the Facebook platform and the other which took the same course in a traditional classroom.

3.1. Methodology

In terms of its epistemological position, this study adopts an interpretivist stance based on social media assisted language learning. In fact, interpretive research began to gain prominence in the research about information systems only at the dawn of the 1990s, when Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) remarked that the interpretive paradigm made only a tiny part of the literature and published works. The emergence of the interpretative trend in Information Systems Research is linked to the fact that a number of researchers have questioned the application of positive precepts in the field of social phenomena research by exposing a range of problems related to this inadequate deployment. Since then, they have called for the

adoption of interpretative approaches, assuming that an information system is both a social and a technical entity (Walsham, 1995).

Moreover, by bringing together social media platforms and language learning in an interactive way, this approach to language teaching might help to motivate students to engage in communicative activities which would ultimately enhance their language skills and bring about learning. Students could be enabled to engage as much as possible in activities which require the use of language, and thus result in learning. The research question is to be answered using data gathered through a qualitative method through a work done with a population of students taking a Business Letters course at the University of Tabuk. The qualitative method provides complex textual descriptions of how people experience in a given research issue. Through this method, the researcher can identify intangible factors such as socioeconomic status, social norms, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent.

3.2. Design and data collection procedures

The data collection was mainly done through semi-directive interviews with participants, but also through passive observation and comparison of the results of pre- and post-tests. The rationale behind such choices was to diversify the techniques of investigation and data collection in order to have as much information as possible for better triangulation possibilities. The choice of semi-structured interviews for Group A students is due to the fact that such interviews allow the researcher to eliminate the interviewees' reservations and encourage them to speak the truth. The interviews were an opportunity for students to express themselves freely, but they were under the researcher's control on specific questions (Wacheux, 1996). This is because when researchers play the role of the thematic guide, they help respondents express their thoughts, remind them of their latest remarks, and refocus the conversation. Ultimately, these interviews aim at gathering students' beliefs, opinions and expectations regarding the pedagogical content of the Facebook page.

An experimental study was conducted on a total of 64 students belonging to the Faculty of Business Administration over two semesters in 2016/17. The first group, which consisted of 26 students, took the course in the first semester. The second group, which had 38 students, took it in the second semester. Each one of the two groups was in turn evenly divided into two groups; the experimental group (group A) and the control group (group B). These students took the Business Letters course in English over the academic year 2016-2017. It was assumed that significant differences in terms of achievement would be found between

the two groups; the one using social media to learn vocabulary and the other that underwent traditional classroom tutoring for the same purpose.

The subjects were third-year students seeking to obtain their Bachelor Degree in management science from the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Tabuk, KSA. They took English language foundation courses previously, in the 1st and 2nd years of their studies. They were supposed to have acquired the basic linguistic knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to write and speak in English. It should be noted that the acquisition of English is a priority for Saudi students wishing to pursue their post-graduate studies, especially for those who wish to do it abroad, at American, British or Australian universities. As regards the selection of the sample, it was made by reasoned choice in order to reflect the diversity of opinions concerning the effects of Facebook use on the students' learning of business English vocabulary.

At the beginning of the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017 a Facebook group was set up for the Business letter course class use (for group A only). The group was asked to follow the Facebook page for updates on new materials and information regarding the course. Although the posts were clear, concise and organized, students were encouraged to interact with each other and with the teacher in case they encountered any difficulties related to language or other aspects of the materials. In fact, this group was exposed to videos and posts in English. The videos contained series of images, objects and scenes in which the targeted vocabulary items were used, supported by sound and subtitled text (e.g. CV, cover letter, Job offer, supply order, quotations, price list, etc.).

Group B took the same vocabulary content but through traditional in-class teaching, using textbooks and board. The same was done in the second semester with the group of 38 students. By the end of the course, all 64 students would have learnt the same vocabulary items and were asked to do the same assignments. Both groups were given the same pre- and post-tests. The assigned tests consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions each. The objective of the pre-test was to assess the students' background knowledge of words. The pre-test was administered after the course ended as a post-test to assess the students' learning of the new vocabulary items.

3.3. Results and findings

The 64 students in both groups with their experimental and control sub-groups (A and B) were tested after they have taken the same course. Overall, the results of the post-test showed

the students' modest level in Business English vocabulary achievement. Indeed, the following table highlights this trend over the two semesters.

Table 1. Pre-test results

Correct answers in pre-test	Semester 1	Semester 2
10	0	0
9	0	2
8	1	2
7	1	1
6	2	4
5	4	9
4	7	9
3	6	2
2	2	4
1	0	3
0	3	2
Total number of students/ group	26	38

Table 2. Post-test results

Correct answers in post-test Groups	Semester 1		Semester 2	
	A	B	A	B
10	0	0	1	0
9	1	0	2	2
8	1	1	2	1
7	3	2	1	2
6	2	4	2	4
5	2	4	8	5
4	3	0	0	3
3	0	2	2	1
2	1	0	1	1
1	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0
	13	13	19	19
Total number of students/ group	26		38	

The results show that there are no great differences between the two groups in terms of achievement, which was nearly at the same level. On the other hand, the results show a slight improvement in students' level after taking the course in both groups, in the traditional class and the Facebook-supported class.

These results are also highlighted in the responses of interviewed students in the experimental groups. Indeed, as one student in these groups said,

I am constantly connected to Facebook via my mobile phone and I consult the group page on a daily basis to see if there are new posts, and I have viewed the photos to better memorize some of the course vocabulary items to improve my grade, which is still fairly average.

Another student says

the course is well explained in the classroom, but more pictures on the Facebook page make memorization of the terms much easier, but I prefer traditional explanation in the classroom because once on Facebook I am attracted to other videos and news instead of consulting Just the group page. I end up wasting my time looking at other pages and links.”

A third student points out that the existence of the course cards with the pictures makes it unnecessary for him to attend the traditional lectures in the classroom. He claims that “there is everything on the Facebook page to properly review and prepare for exams in such a way that there is no need to attend the course in class.” Another student’s view was that

the Facebook page with the explanation of the classroom teacher allowed me to better solve the test questions. Besides, my marks have improved. I find that Facebook can be used as an entertainment tool but also as a teaching tool on condition that we are well controlled by our teacher.

The interviewees’ responses show that their views about the subject taught were affected by Facebook use although the test results do not allow us to decide about the exact nature of this influence (positive or negative), and even less on the possible pedagogical role that social networks such as Facebook can play. Moreover, the results reached do not allow us to confirm the positive or negative effects of Facebook use, because the students’ opinions remain rather mixed. Most of the interviewed students highlight their chronic weakness in English and admit that they consult Facebook on a daily basis not to follow the pedagogical material posted for them to improve their knowledge but more to follow their friends’ news, watch videos, play and entertain themselves in their own way.

In this way, it can be argued that Facebook distracts students and disrupts their learning process. This corroborates the findings of previous studies, such as the ones done by Tariq et al. (2012) and Ketari and Khanum (2013), which highlight the negative effects of Facebook use on students’ concentration and their academic careers. Yet, we have noted a slight improvement in the results of some students; 2 in the first semester and 5 in the second semester (Group A students who obtained 8 correct responses in the post-test). These students’ achievement in the pre-test was fairly average, as they got only five correct answers. They had used Facebook frequently for years and found out that the combination of the two learning methods is conducive to improving their level. As one of the students says, “the Facebook page is interactive due to the videos which contain visual examples with captions, I can better memorize certain terms because now I combine them with the visualized images”. Another student says on the same subject:

thanks to my attendance in the classroom and the posts on the Facebook page, I was able to better understand the course and do the exercises more easily. More importantly, I was able to

have a good mark in the test. The Facebook page helped me a lot in learning and mastering the new vocabulary.

The students' responses show that the content of the Facebook page can help the diffusion of knowledge via pedagogical videos posted online. Therefore, we can safely claim that the Facebook platform can help students in the process of understanding and learning English vocabulary. Thus, the findings of studies such as the ones done by Roblyer et al. (2010), Yang et al. (2011) and Novak et al. (2012), which emphasize the positive effect of social networks on students' learning, are corroborated. However, in terms of post-test results, not much was achieved.

The students who participated in the Facebook tutoring generally exhibited a positive attitude toward this new type of learning experience. The learning achievement of the Facebook group was slightly better than that of the control group. Students' attitudes towards Facebook tutoring were on the whole positive as the platform provided them with a flexible environment to communicate and share information. However, there was no significant difference in terms of learning achievement between Facebook-assisted language learning and traditional classroom teaching. Hence, we need to distinguish between students' attitude and receptivity towards the use of social media in language learning and their actual achievement in that area. The solution might be that our students need more motivation and scaffolding by instructors to improve their achievement in the area of English vocabulary learning. Besides, it seems that further research is needed to better understand the effects of social media on second language learning. It also seems that teachers need to fine tune their social media assisted teaching strategies as they gain more insight into the workings of such media and the nature of students' interaction with them. We hope that in the future, with the development of more sophisticated strategies and methods, both student's attitudes and learning achievement would be positively affected by social media use in our universities.

4. Limitations of the present study and recommendations for the future

The present study dealt with a limited number of students (64) studying at the Business Administration Faculty of the University of Tabuk. It focused only on the Facebook platform. Still, more research is needed for a decisive view on the exact effects of social media use on foreign language learning in university settings. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate the educational use of social media further and construct a conceptual model with dependent variables to test the degree of the possible contribution of Facebook, and even other platforms, to the learning process, with the involvement of more faculties and departments. In

order to test this model, it would be imperative to enlarge the sample size by switching to a quantitative methodology based on a positivist epistemological approach, which requires a large-scale survey at the university level. Such an approach could be the subject of future research developments for a wide exploration of the possible impact of social networks on students' learning abilities and achievement.

Although the results of the present study were not conclusive, we still recommend that universities adopt social media in their programs to catch up with their rapid proliferation and students' need for them. Studies into the effects of social media on foreign language learning have reached different results and some media drawbacks might be extant. However, one thing is certain: if learners at different levels were to use such media they have to be guided and controlled to guarantee their principled use. While the way social media are to be utilized should take into consideration the specific cultural and educational context, it should be the subject of debates involving all concerned parties, especially students, because if those media are introduced into university curricula it is not because they are in vogue but because they are authentic and would really address students' needs and learning styles. Therefore, any measure in that direction should be widely discussed and not imposed. Educators have to make sure that students, who have become dependent on social media, will interact with the right people about the right subjects in the most appropriate ways to maximize their learning.

Social media should also be adopted by universities because the concept of learning itself is undergoing dramatic changes due to the unprecedented development in communication technology. Learning is no longer individually accumulated by attending teacher-centered lectures and tutorials; it is now based on "principles of collective exploration, play and innovation" (Selwyn 2012, p.3). Today, learning is seen as the learners' aptitude to access databases and information hubs anytime anywhere they need to. Students nowadays live in a more dynamic, information-dependent and connected world. They have grown into information-hungry group-dependent individuals on the go, whose thirst for knowledge can only be quenched by offering them the possibility to be socially and scientifically connected to other communities of learners around the globe, with whom they can instantly exchange information to evolve into more knowledgeable individuals. In terms of concrete measure concerning those students, the evaluation of their assignments and co-authored works should be reconsidered in the light of their use of social media (Selwyn, 2012). Ways to support and supervise students using social media should be reconsidered and traditional institutional courses should be repackaged via motivating discussion groups or pages monitored or moderated by leading students.

5. Conclusion

The present study sought to show the effects of social media use, in particular Facebook, by a sample of Business Administration students on their learning and achievement in the domain of business vocabulary. The interviews with these students and their observation showed that their attitudes towards Facebook-assisted teaching were on the whole positive. Yet, the overall results of the post-test demonstrated their limited achievement despite the slight improvement they showed after taking the course in its two versions (traditional and Facebook-assisted). These results partly corroborate previous studies findings (Tariq et al., 2012; Ketari & Khanum, 2013).

Still, these results should not undermine the originality of our study for three reasons; first this study was done in an Arab country, i.e. the KSA, which is known as a socio-culturally conservative country where learning a foreign language (English in this case) is not an easy task unless the learner spends some time in a country where that language is spoken. Therefore, local students have for long suffered from chronic weakness in foreign languages, which is partly due to their socio-cultural barriers. Secondly, the study focused on the domain of business English vocabulary, and not general English vocabulary. Thirdly, the present study findings allowed us to distinguish between the effects of Facebook tutoring, on the one hand on students' attitudes and motivation towards the course taken, and on their achievement in that course on the other.

Finally, despite the limited and inconclusive results of Facebook use on students' achievement, we believe that our universities should catch up with the rapid social and technological changes, and if they want to graduate students who will become operative citizens working for the good of their community, they have to cater for their needs, and give them more responsibility in planning their learning activities. In other words, if our universities want to be in the service of their communities, they should adjust to this new culture of e-learning and consider its tenets when designing its curricula and programs. Hence, the nature and function of higher education should be reappraised in the light of recent developments in communication technology and social media usage.

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