

The Effect of Social Networks on the Improvement of Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract: The overwhelming use of social networks amongst the new generation and their spectacular growth enables EFL students to use the language outside the classroom and in everyday life routines. Since traditional language learning has its flaws and limitations in improving EFL students, as it decreases the chances of using the language outside the classroom, it is crucial to adopt an up-to-date methodology which enables EFL students to use the language outside the classroom. The main concern of this study was to shed light on the usefulness of social networking sites to improve EFL students. The study was conducted using a sample of 45 randomly chosen female EFL university students, at Salman Bin AbdulAziz University in Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. All the participants, whose ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, subscribed to a minimum of one social network. Data was collected through a 23 questions questionnaire. Students showed a positive attitude towards using social networks in language learning. The study verified that social networks are meaningful means which can improve the students' language and promote their academic knowledge and skills.

key words: social networks ,EFL , language learning .

1.Introduction

Nowadays, the internet has become one of the most powerful avenues for disseminating information. The everyday use of the internet has played a major role in the improvement of students' English language and has brought about significant changes in the way students find, manage and use information. The internet has been designed to meet an array of quite different purposes, some of which are certainly educational. In the absence of face-to-face contact, the internet supports the international networks formed around shared interests either political, religious, medical, or academic. Regardless to the subject matter of these communities, some are considered as self-educating communities.

In such a digital world, wireless networks are widely deployed through mobile devices such as mobile phones, iPods, iPads and mp3 players to access information almost anytime and at any location. However, our vision of pedagogy requires expansion. Students ,instead of being passive, should be active participants and co-producers to knowledge so that learning becomes participatory and social process which supports personal life goals and needs (McLoughlin and Lee, 2007, p. 664). Recently, researchers have become more aware of the importance of enabling students to become more involved in the learning process rather than

being merely receptive to knowledge. Al-Shehri (2011) has criticised EFL learning as “an in class only learning practice” because there are very limited chances for students to practice language outside the classroom. According to Al-Shehri, such EFL learning should be “more student-centred, meaningful, and contextualized language learning that extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom” (P.2).

Social networking sites have the potential to establish learning which is more student-centred, participatory and part of the social process. These sites are redefining the way students and teachers use the internet, particularly in second and foreign language education. In the educational realm, teachers can use these sites to post assignments, tests, quizzes and other topics in order to obtain further discussion outside of the classroom setting.

1.1 Statement of the problem:

Since traditional language learning has its flaws and limitations in improving EFL students, as it decreases the chances of using the language outside the classroom, it is crucial therefore to adopt an up-to-date methodology which enables EFL students to use the language outside the classroom and in everyday life routines. Social networking sites are such important means to enhance the language of such EFL students. With the spectacular growth of social networks, they have the potential to establish that particular type of learning which is more student-centred, participatory and involved in the learning process.

1.2 Purpose of the study:

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the usefulness of social networks to improve EFL students. Nowadays, EFL students are overwhelmingly using social networks in their daily routines. Therefore, social networks should be added to traditional education in order to reinforce the learning process in school communities.

1.3 Significance of the study:

This paper is conducted for the purpose of all teachers in the educational field and curriculum makers to focus their attention on the importance of utilizing the new technology and social networks in their teaching process in order to create communicative language learning environment that goes beyond traditional language learning. The passive status of students in the language learning community should be changed and they have to be part of the learning process by their activeness and cooperation. It's definite that social networks will provide students with a fun and smooth way for effective and motivational language learning

1.4. Research questions:

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- What is EFL students' perspective on social networks?
- 2- What are the implications of using social networks for improving EFL learning?
- 3- What is EFL students' perspective on the effectiveness of traditional education on language improvement?

2. Research Method

2.1 Participants of the study:

The study was conducted using a sample of 45 randomly chosen female EFL university students, all of whom were studying a Bachelor degree in English language, at Prince Salman University in Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. All the participants, whose ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, subscribed to a minimum of one social network. Participants were chosen randomly from different levels: from level 2 up to level 8.

2.2 Instrument of the study:

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire developed by the researcher, with the intention of presenting data consistent with the recommendations noted in the literature review. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections: a) The students' perspective of social networking sites, b) The educational effectiveness of social networks, and c) The students' perspective of traditional education (see Appendix A).

It was decided that to maintain respondents' interest it would be beneficial to keep the required responses short, to avoid the necessity for the participants to write long answers, the questionnaire included twenty two closed-ended items and only one open-ended question. Answers were included with the twenty two closed-ended items, and boxes were provided for respondents to tick. The open ended question was an essay question about the advantages and disadvantages of social networks from the point of view of the participants. The remainder of the questions were simple and succinct in order to meet the research purpose and so as not to consume too much time. The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' perspectives on social networking and to establish the way students might use as a tool to improve their English language skills. The questionnaire was also designed to determine the students' perspectives of the effectiveness of traditional education on improving their language skills, and to reflect their attitudes towards traditional education versus social networks in the same regard.

2.3 Data collection and analysis:

Data was collected through only the one instrument: a questionnaire. Students were asked by their teachers to write their names if they were willing to complete a social networking questionnaire. A date was scheduled, and the questionnaire was administered in class including forty five students in the second semester of the 2011/2012 academic year. Instructions were given by the researcher, then the questions and possible answers were read out and explained by the researcher. Over a period of 30-40 minutes, the students handed their papers in to the researcher. After the completion of the task, the data was analysed and commented upon by the researcher using the qualitative and quantitative methods. In each question, the frequency and mean scores of every choice were counted using the SPSS program. A table was presented for further illustration for every question. Afterwards, descriptive statistics were generated in every question to explain the students' responses.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Questionnaire results

3.1.1 Section A: Student's perspective of social networking sites

All the students who participated in the questionnaire were members of at least one social network. Eighty four point four percent of the students indicated twitter as their favorite social networking site followed by Facebook by 68.9%. Youtube and BBM have scored the same frequency by 48.9% of the students. the vast majority of the students 71% used social networks for educational reasons and for fun as well. Mobile phones are used by 77.8% of the students to log in their favorite network which means that they can log in their networks anytime and in any place. The questionnaire has also shown that around 66.7% of the students sometimes access their accounts on their favorite network when they are out whereas 22.2% never log in when they are out and that 31.1% of the students are always logged on.

3.1.2 Section B : Educational effectiveness of social network

Statement	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
I use English as means of communication on social networks.	26	57.8	18	40	1	2.2
I use social networks to interact with native speakers of English.	31	68.9	9	20	5	11.1

Statement	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
I use social networks to share information with one another.	32	71.1	10	22.2	3	6.7
I think social networks assisted me in English learning.	34	75.6	10	22.2	1	2.2
I can express my thoughts more freely in social networks.	34	75.6	11	24.4	0	0
Social networks made me read/ write more in English.	37	82.2	8	17.7	0	0
My English proficiency improved with use of social networks.	37	82.2	8	17.8	0	0
Using social networks is a good thing for students.	39	86.7	5	11.1	1	2.2
I would like to see social networks used more widely in English classes as a learning assessment tool	40	88.9	4	8.9	1	2.2
My English vocabulary increased after using social networks.	40	88.9	4	8.9	1	2.2

Generally, students showed a positive attitude towards using English while socialising in social networks. 57.8 % of the students used English as means of communication in social networks and 68.9% interacted with native speakers of English which contributes in enhancing their English. In addition, 75.6% students stated that social networks assisted them in English learning and the same number of students thought that they can express their ideas more freely in social networks. Moreover, none of the students (0%) have disagreed that social networks improved their English language as 82.2% have agreed on that statement and 17.8% were neutral. Besides, 82.2% agreed that social networks made them read and write more in English. The findings have also showed that 86.7% have agreed that social networks are good for students and only one student thought the opposite. Additionally, 88.9% have agreed that their English vocabulary has increased after using social networks and the same number of students 88.9% would like to see social networks used more widely in English classes as a learning assessment tool. The students showed a positive attitude towards the role of social networks in the improvement of their English.

The students were asked to write the advantages and disadvantages of social networks from their own perspective. It was obvious that they appreciated the use of social networks as 90% of the participants have stated that they improved their English vocabulary and spelling. With the use of social networks, 78% had more opportunity to use the language than before. There were 60% of the participants who thought that social networks had no disadvantage, whereas 40% have named some disadvantages. Some of which were the use of abbreviations and shortenings for words which will affect their spelling. Another disadvantage was that social networks could waste their time.

3.1.3 Section C : Student’s perspective of traditional education

Question	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
I think English course/ work books are enough tools for students to master English.	2	4.4	10	22.2	33	73.3
I think classrooms are an efficient environment for students to practice English.	3	6.7	11	24.4	31	68.9
I express myself freely when I am in class.	5	11.1	16	35.6	24	53.3

Concerning traditional education, participants were asked to rate its tools and effectiveness from their point of view. It was obvious that participants were not satisfied with the effectiveness of traditional education as 73.1% have disagreed on the phrase “I think English course /work books are enough tools for students to master English”, 68.9% have also disagreed that classrooms are efficient environment for students to practice English and 53.3% don’t express themselves freely in class.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Question one

In regard to social networking sites, the results revealed that the students view these sites extremely favorably; they visit their pages frequently and on a regular basis. Some of the sites the students are most attached to include Twitter, Facebook, BBM, WhatsApp and personal blogs. In addition, many students indicated that they check on their pages daily from their mobile phones, even when they are out of the house. The reasons for the enormous use of these sites varied from educating themselves to amusement and meeting new people; revealing that students are aware of these new technologies. The students socialise with each

other as well as with other people through social networks. Moreover, it is evident that students value social networks, as they clearly constitute a part of their daily routines.

3.2.2 Question two

In response to the second question, the overall results showed that the students had a positive attitude towards using social networks to improve their English language skills. The majority of the students (57.8%) used English as a medium of communication and would use social networks to express their thoughts or interact with native speakers. The interaction with native speakers of English helped creating an authentic language learning conditions that went beyond traditional EFL classrooms. Students stated that using social networks made them read and write more in English, thereby increasing their English vocabulary and improving key skills. In addition, many students also stated that social networks helped them learn English faster and easier than they did in class.

There was an agreement amongst the students that social networks improved their English proficiency. The implementation of social networks into the educational process would be highly valued by students, as they find it a useful learning/assessment tool. It is evident that the students were aware of the effectiveness of social networks on improving their language skills.

Regarding the pros and cons of social networks, the students thought that social networks helped them to practice English more often than they do in the classroom. The students also agreed that social networks helped them to read faster in English than they used to be capable of doing. Furthermore, social networks improved their motivation, academic knowledge and skills. Some students confirmed that using social networks has helped them in their spelling abilities and has improved their reading and writing skills. Others stated that social networks have had no negative influences on their English learning. However, several students believed that social networks adversely influenced their writing abilities due to the abbreviated styles common to social networking sites. This crucial issue should be taken into consideration by researchers to enable them to help students avoid this phenomenon.

According to these findings, it is vital to implement social networks into the learning/teaching process. Teachers and curriculum-designers must take an account of the students' obsession with technology and social networks to serve educational purposes. Rezaee and Oladi (2008) confirmed that the critical role of interaction in learning is reinforced by the addition of social networking to the school community, not undermined. Therefore, the addition of the learning network augments the learning community rather than provides an alternative to it, resulting in the overall enhancement of the learning environment.(p.9).

3.2.3 Question three

EFL practices can be characterised as traditional language-learning settings in which teachers direct the learning process, and students are then assumed to be passive recipients of knowledge (Al-Shehri, 2008). In order to identify the difficulties students might encounter while learning English, they were asked to briefly evaluate some of the traditional teaching methods that occur within the classroom environment, as well as the work/course book used as tools to assist them in improving their English skills. The results revealed that the vast majority of the students were not satisfied with the current state of the EFL teaching and learning process. The students felt that classroom provided them with limited opportunities to practice English, stating that it was not an efficient environment for them to practice in. Moreover, the students felt that the classroom failed to offer them the freedom to express their thoughts and ideas adequately. As Al-Shehri (2011) stated, EFL learning has been criticised as being “an in-class-only” learning practice, due to the rarity of opportunities an EFL learner can expect to encounter outside the boundaries of the classroom. Additionally, course/work books are not efficient tools for helping students to improve their English. The findings of Nah’s (2008) study also demonstrated that traditional language-learning settings provided students with “limited in-class input opportunities” in comparison to the unlimited input opportunities provided through the use of mobile phones and their applications, which are available whenever and wherever the students want to use them. New technologies and social networking sites should therefore be taken into consideration in the EFL teaching process in order to increase students’ motivation levels and to improve their knowledge and skills.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the present landscape of technological and social change, important transformations are underway in terms of the ways in which people live and work. Contemporary times are referred to as the “information age” or a “knowledge based society”, characterised by the diffusion of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the increasing demand for new educational approaches and pedagogies that foster lifelong learning (Fischer & Konomi, 2005).

Several studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of social networks on EFL learning and teaching. However, the purpose of this study was to raise the educationalists’ awareness in order to prompt them to adopt new methodologies in EFL teaching through the use of new technology and social networks. The study was conducted with a sample of 45 female university students, who undertook a 23-question survey. The purpose of this survey was to shed light on the effectiveness of social networks on improving EFL students’ English language skills. From the findings of this study, it can be definitively stated that there is a positive attitude towards using social networks among the younger generation, as social networks appear to play an important role in their daily routines. Students overwhelmingly use social

networks to interact with each other on a daily basis. Most students log into their pages in a given social network as regularly as every couple of hours, and the language used to communicate in social networks is typically English. The students stated that social networks improved their motivation, academic knowledge and skills, and their English vocabulary has also increased. The implementation of social networks in the educational process would be highly valued by students, as they find it a good learning/assessment tool.

According to these findings, it is vital to implement social networks into the learning/teaching process. Teachers and curriculum–designers must take account of students’ obsession with technology and social networks and harness this to serve educational purposes.

4.1 Pedagogical implications:

1. The use of social networks offers powerful information-sharing and collaborative opportunities for learners and learning.
2. Social networks can grant researchers and educationalists with ample evidence regarding the advantages offered by this particular method of teaching English.
3. A significant implication of this study is related to the effects of making learning public, rather than confining it within a protected community of learners.
4. Such a learning methodology through social networks would make students more motivated about the learning process.
5. The implementation of social networks into the educational process would be highly valued by students, as they find it to be a good learning/assessment tool.
6. Social networks provide individuals with a way of maintaining and strengthening social ties, which can be beneficial in both social and academic settings.

4.2 Suggestions for further studies:

The need for further research is undeniable; more studies are required to be carried out regarding social networks as educational and learning tools. An enhanced and empirical understanding of the nature and patterns of learning that occur within social network communities should be the aim of future research in this arena. Future studies ought to employ larger numbers of participants, and include both males and females. Critically engaging learners in the learning process by encouraging them to publish their own postings, either on personal weblogs or on a community weblog, is likely to prove to be constructive in future research.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Section A : Students' perspective on social networking sites.

1. Are you a member of a social networking sites?

Yes No

2. Which of these social networks are you a member of?

Twitter Facebook Blogs
 Flickr YouTube BBM (blackberry Messenger)
 MySpace Others (Specify)

3. Which is your favorite social network?

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4. Why do you use social networks?

Wasting time and having fun. Meeting new people. Educational reasons.
 all the above.

5. How many times in a day do you visit your page on a social network ?

Once a day Every hour Every couple of hours
 2-5 times a day More than 5 times Always logged on

6. How do you log in your favorite social network ?

From the mobile phone (BlackBerry, I phone ..).
 I pad/ I pod Computer (Desk top or Lap top).

7. Do you access your social network via mobile phone when you are out ?

Always Sometimes Never

Section B : Educational effectiveness of social network

B. Educational effectiveness of social networks.

8. My English proficiency improved with the use of social networks.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
9. I use social networks to interact with native speakers of English.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
10. I think social networks assisted me in English learning.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
11. Social networks made me read/write more in English.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
12. My English vocabulary increased after using social networks.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
13. I would like to see social networks used more widely in English classes as a learning/assessment tool.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
14. I can express my thoughts more freely in social networks.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
15. Using social networks is a good thing for students.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
16. I use English as a medium of communication in social networks.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
17. I use social networks to share information with one another.	<input type="checkbox"/> agree	<input type="checkbox"/> neutral	<input type="checkbox"/> disagree	
18. Rate your English before using social networks?				
	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Average	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor

19. Rate your English **after** using social networks?

- Excellent Good Average
- Poor Very poor`

20. What do you think the **advantages** and **disadvantages** of social networks for the students' language?

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21. I express myself freely when I am in class.

- agree neutral disagree

22. I think classrooms are efficient environment for students to practice English.

- agree neutral disagree

23. I think English course/work books are enough tools for students to master English.

تأثير شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي على تطوير طالبات اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في السعودية

الملخص: إن استخدام الجيل الجديد لشبكات التواصل الاجتماعي وتطورها المستمر مكّن الدارسين للغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية من استخدامها خارج الفصل الدراسي وفي روتين حياتهم اليومية. نظراً لأن تعلم اللغة التقليدي له مساوئه ومحدوديته في تطوير الدارسين للغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، حيث إنه يقلل فرص استخدام اللغة خارج الفصل الدراسي، وأصبح من الضرورة تبني طريقة تدريس حديثة تمكن دارسى اللغة من استخدامها خارج الفصل الدراسي. إن الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على أهمية شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في تطوير لغة الدارسين للغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم تطبيق الدراسة عن طريق عينة عشوائية مكونه من خمسة وأربعين طالبة من جامعة سلمان بن عبدالعزيز في الخرج – المملكة العربية السعودية . وقد اشتركت جميع الطالبات واللاتي تراوحت أعمارهن ما بين 18 إلى 24 في شبكة اجتماعية واحدة على الأقل. وجمعت البيانات عن طريق استبانة مكونة من 23 سؤالاً. وأظهرت الطالبات توجهات إيجابية فيما يتعلق باستخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في تعلم اللغة. وقد أثبتت الدراسة أن شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي هي وسيلة ناجحة لتطوير لغة الطالبات ورفع مستواهنّ العلمي والمهاري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تعلم اللغة.