

Students' Perceptions on Social Media Use in Language Learning

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Abstract

Social media are part and parcel of the daily lives of millions of people all over the world and have a tremendous impact upon every facet of our personal and professional lives. Given that a large number of internet users are students and teachers, social media platforms seem to greatly influence the way we teach and learn. In fact, as these tools facilitate discussion, participation, and the sharing of various forms of content (namely, text, video, audio and image), they have become a pivotal resource for students across all subjects.

Our objective in this paper is to examine the potential role that social media play in learning languages. To that end, a survey was conducted to examine university students' perceptions and attitudes about using these platforms in learning foreign languages. Results of the study demonstrated that 82% of the surveyed students stated that they use these social networking websites to improve their language and communication skills or even to learn new languages. Results of the survey also showed that through social media use, learners enhance the four language skills, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. Yet, listening was found to be the major skill that students claim to enhance.

Taking these findings into account, we may stipulate that social media applications and learning languages have become inseparable because these online platforms make language learning an easier process by being fun, interactive and interesting. The tools that help people connect with each other also come forward to make language learning a more enriching experience. Given these educational benefits, we recommend that educators use social media in distant, blended, or face-to-face language learning contexts.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, the Internet has evolved from a means for distributing "read-only" and static information resources to a set of social websites where people interact, share and constantly update huge amounts of decentralized information. The Web has now become an interactive and participatory "read-write" universal channel where users are both producers and consumers of digital content.

This new conception of the Web as a platform for computing and collaborative interaction has been supported by the development of so-called social media. The latter can be defined as interactive online tools via which individuals and communities create and share user-generated content, or as a set of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 technologies, and that allow the production and exchange of user-generated content [1].

Social media encompass a wide variety of Internet networking and communication tools including social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, wikis as well as media sharing and bookmarking websites.

This type of media has become ubiquitous and part of our daily lives and has a remarkable impact upon every facet of our personal and professional lives. Since most internet users are students, social media seem to have greatly influenced the way they learn. Students now have recourse to social media in nearly every aspect of their life. They use these online social communities to communicate with their friends, play games and watch TV. But most importantly, they use them to learn. Actually, social media tools have become a pivotal resource for students across all subjects.

The objective of this paper is, therefore, to examine students' perceptions and attitudes concerning the use of social media technologies in learning languages. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In Section Two we outline the potential advantages that social media present to language learners. Section Three presents the results of a study we undertook to examine students' use of these platforms to improve their language skills. Finally, Section Four gives a brief conclusion.

2. Social Media and Language Learning: Potential Benefits

In most traditional language learning contexts, teachers always direct the learning process while students assume a passive and receptive role [2], [3]. In such teacher-centred learning settings,



language learners encounter rare opportunities beyond the classroom walls to practice their language and communication skills. Given these shortcomings, traditional language learning methods have been the subject of much criticism. To overcome these limitations, resort has to be made to more student-centered, meaningful, and contextualized language learning that extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom. To this end, social media can be made use of to establish learning practices that are not only based on learners' needs and experiences, but also to enable learners to get engaged in the overall learning process that sometimes goes beyond the classroom [4].

The numerous studies carried out on social media use on education demonstrate that these web-based applications have many educational benefits [5]. In fact, it has been found out that social media foster communication and interaction among students and between teachers and students. By using these platforms, instructors and students can communicate with each other within or between classes in new and exciting ways [6]. These tools are also an effective way to promote students' engagement and learning power as they enable shy, intimidated or bored students to share ideas and to express their opinions in a more comfortable way [7], [8]. It has also been demonstrated that social media also foster collaboration given that they offer teachers and students a single destination where they can bring their ideas together, examine them with their colleagues and publish them in a way that can be edited [9]. In addition to all these benefits, social online communities function as a digital repository to which teachers and students can resort to for an answer to a question that may have or for a solution to a problem they may face. In this sense, social media help both faculty and students deepen their knowledge and understanding in any specific field. It is not just about acquiring specialized knowledge from someone on the web, it is about producing content to contribute to this knowledge network [10].

Taking all these educational benefits into consideration, social media may then serve as an optimal environment for learning languages. These social applications actually make language learning an easier process by being fun, interactive and interesting. The online platforms that help people connect with each other could also be used to make language learning faster, easier and more engaging.

The language learner can now turn a laborious task like studying into something enjoyable by meeting and interacting with native language speakers from around the world through social media. Social networking websites, such as Facebook and Twitter are now places where a person can practice his language skills with real native speakers. There are also specifically designed online language learning communities that offer interactive lessons, exams, writing exercises, reading comprehension tests as well as text, audio and video chat in a variety of languages. Users can, for instance, write a text in a foreign language such as Italian or Spanish and submit it to have a native speaker in the network correct their writing.

Media sharing websites are also valuable tools for language learners. Teachers or even simply language-passionate people that have little to do with the language teaching experience can, through these online platforms, help people around the world learn new languages. In YouTube, Dailymotion or VoiceThread, for example, one can watch or listen to all kinds of spoken language (formal, informal, colloquial, slang) of all genres (debates, talks, shows, movies..) and learn a lot of vocabulary in context, which will certainly help them improve their listening skills. Beyond just getting information from these social media tools, language learners are also given an opportunity to create their own presentations. By creating their own videos, students can apply the target language to real-world situations. and by uploading them on social media, they can get feedback on their speaking skills from others [11].

Social media, mainly blogs, online forums and wikis, students can also improve their writing skills. Some people believe that communication via these online applications ruins writing and reinforces bad writing habits as it contains grammar and spelling errors as well as abbreviations. However, evidence has proven that social media in general have positive effects on students' writings. At school, students often see themselves as writing only for the teacher. But when they know that what they write will be for a wider audience since it is to be shared on social media, they put in much more efforts into writing their papers.

3. Language learners and Social Media

Having outlined the educational benefits of social media, our objective in this section is to present the results of a study we undertook to examine students' perceptions and attitudes about using this set of online social tools for language learning.

3.1 Methodology

The study was carried out by using an anonymous online questionnaire consisting of a series of closed questions. Such questions are opted for because they are quicker to answer and responses are easier to compare and analyze [12].

The study's target population consisted of students from Mohammed V Souissi University, Morocco. 564 students participated in the survey. 234 are females and 330 are males. Their age varies between 20 and 23. The students completed the online survey between March and May 2013. By using an online questionnaire the intention was to reach the vast majority of participants and achieve a very high response rate.

The questionnaire consisted of two main parts. The first part collects demographic information while the second part gathers information about social media use for language learning.

3.2 Data analysis

To collect enough information about students' attitudes and perceptions about using social media in learning languages, the participants were asked a variety of questions.

To identify the social networking sites that students mainly use, the latter were asked to choose from a predefined list the ones that they are members of. Results showed that the most popular online communities are Facebook (99%), Google+ (61%), and Twitter (47%). Consider the illustration below.

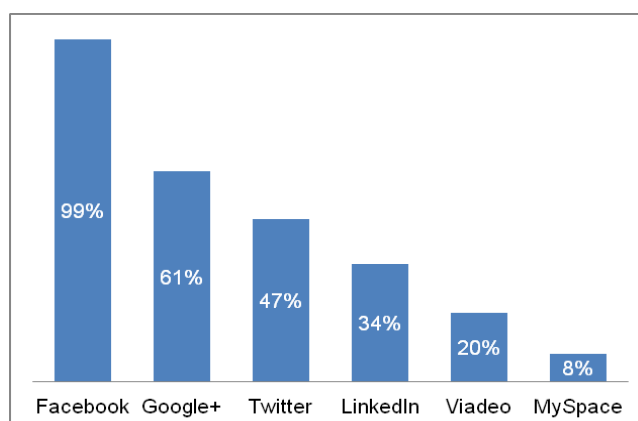


Fig.1: Students' membership in social networking sites

In contrast to Facebook, Google+ and Twitter, LinkedIn (34%), Viadeo (20%) and MySpace (8%) are the least frequently used social networks among students. Apart from MySpace, which does not seem to be widely used in Morocco, the low percentage associated with both LinkedIn and Viadeo may be due to the fact that these online communities are mainly used for job related purposes. As such, they may not be of great use to students.

Concerning the use of social media for language learning purposes, 82% of the surveyed students claimed that they use this set of online tools to improve their language skills or even learn new foreign languages. The most common languages that the informants are interested in improving or learning are given in Figure 2 below.

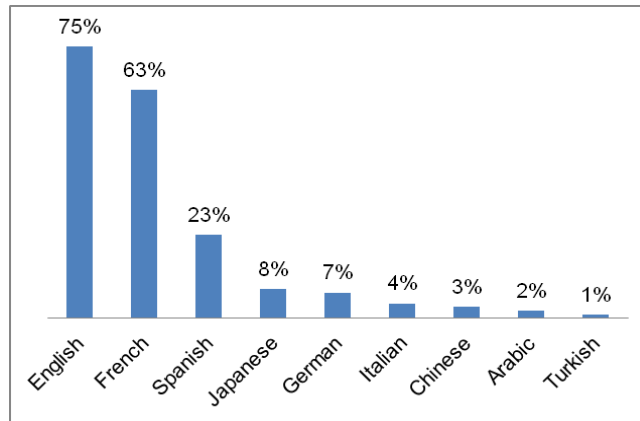


Fig.2: Students' use of social media for learning languages

The students were also asked to indicate the social media technologies that they use to enhance their language skills. The results of the study demonstrated that the online tools chosen vary from one student to another. This is illustrated in the following figure.

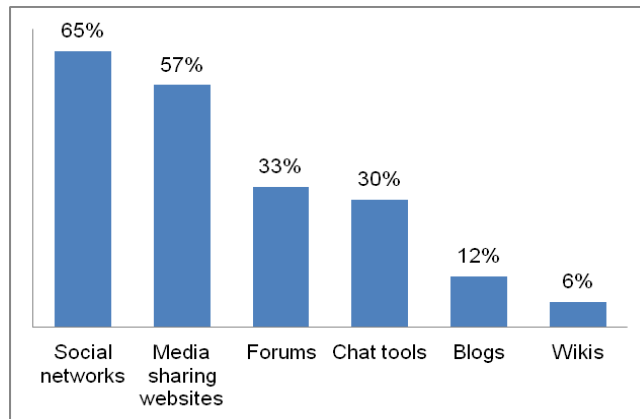


Fig.3: Social media tools used in language learning

As is clearly seen, most of the students opt for social networks (e.g. Facebook) and media sharing websites (namely YouTube and Dailymotion). Nevertheless, it has been noticed that though there are a number of social networking websites that are totally dedicated to language learning (e.g. Livemocha and Busuu), none of the surveyed students seems to use them.

Students were also asked to select the major language skill - listening, speaking, reading, or writing - that is improving better than the others thanks to social media. Figure 4 below shows the mean ratings for each language skill.

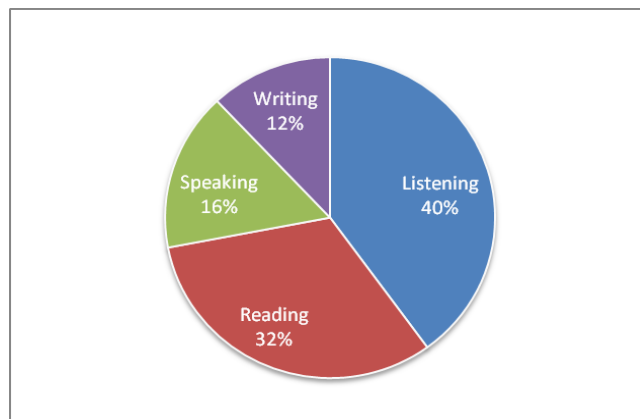


Fig.4: Students' Ratings for the main improved language skill



As the figure above shows, the major language skills that are reported to be improving are listening (40%) and reading (32%).

However, though the surveyed students all agree that social media have contributed to enhancing the four language skills with varying degrees, a great percentage of informants (i.e. 92%) claimed that learning by having recourse solely to social communities is not sufficient, but should go hand in hand with classroom-based learning.

4. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to analyze university students' perceptions about using social media in language learning. The results of the online questionnaire conducted amongst Moroccan higher education students have proven that this set of networking platforms are widely used to improve language skills. In fact, it has been found out that the surveyed students have managed to enhance the four language skills, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. Taking these findings into account, we strongly believe that social media are valuable educational tools that are capable of enriching the language learning experience. Therefore, we recommend that educators use these online social communities whether they are working in fully online, blended, or face-to-face language learning environments.

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