

The Effect of Interaction through Social Networks Sites on Learning English in Iranian EFL Context

Khatereh Khoshnoud¹, Alireza Karbalaei²

¹Department of English, Bastak branch, Islamic Azad University, Bastak, Iran; ²Department of English, Farhangian University, Iran

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effect of interaction in social network websites on enhancing acquisition of English language in students studying in language institutes. Since the emergence of Social Network Sites (SNS) in 2005, they have been potentially affective in area of education in general and foreign language learning in particular. Language learners may use social networks sites (SNS) as a mean to get engaged and motivated in meaningful communicative situations. This study was conducted among 40 active and regular EFL intermediate level EFL learners in Qalame Bartar Language institute joining a Facebook group who are familiar with using computer and internet as participants of the study. The data were collected from the learners' interactional exchanges in the weekly posts, from social interaction and discussion in SNSs; research conducted in related subject and the tests given to these participants after using SNS for 60 days. Based on data analysis, the EFL learners' language learning skills in the treatment group highly increased during this period in comparison to the control group. The findings indicate interaction through SNS putting learner in real communicative situations plays an important role in enhancing the development of foreign language learning.

Keywords: SNS- social network sites. Facebook. English foreign language learner (EFL). Social media language learning (SMLL). Computer assisted language learning (CALL)

Introduction

Research on second language acquisition or language learning based on the Interactionist framework that is originated from the sociocultural framework (Vygotsky 1978) emphasized the importance of collaborative learning and learner-learner meaningful interaction. From the perspective of this Interactionist framework, Chappelle (2003) explains that "interaction between people is expected to promote negotiation of meaning, and if it does so, this should be beneficial for language acquisition". But still the majority of English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms tend to lack the necessary characteristics of interactive learning environment where learners can be engaged in active participation and dynamic interaction to use and practice English for various authentic purposes (Murad & Norizan, 2012).

However, today, due to the rapid advances of Social Network Sites (SNSs) as collaborative technologies, the opportunities for EFL learners to access such online interactive environments are increasing. One of the main educational benefits of using SNSs is that they provide learners with more chances for interaction to face the common obstacles of negotiating their ideas. Another benefit of using SNSs is that they allow learners to enter new active learning environments of collaborative and interactive learning. Facebook (FB), as one of these SNSs, is another informal system equipped with tools designed for social interaction that students are re-appropriating for learning purposes (Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison, & Wash, 2011). Therefore,

Corresponding author: Khatereh Khoshnoud, Department of English, Bastak branch, Islamic Azad University, Bastak, Iran. E-mail: desertrosekaee@hotmail.com

collaborative technologies play a key role in shaping community environment and interaction.

Yet, the application of SNSs is still a common way in the EFL context. Moreover, according to Beer and Burrows (2007), despite the evidence of the potential of SNSs in assisting learners to share, exchange and construct knowledge and form various modes of communication, interaction and collaboration, the exciting potential of such new technologies especially in EFL contexts is yet to be fully explored.

Regarding the importance of SNSs, the main research question raised in the present study is whether communicating via SNSs can enhance language learning in EFL learners or not. The present study aims to examine the following research question:

Does interaction through Social Networks Sites enhance learning English in an Iranian EFL Context?

Review of literature

As foreign language acquisition is becoming more and more a social process, SNSs will become the classroom of the future language learners and most of the language learning will be on these sites connecting with other students and teachers near or far, and it will enable students to communicate across the world. Language learners are able to enhance their language skill during using such kind of networks. It provides learners with the possibility of participating in English language communicative situations without the help of a dominant power or an experienced teacher and gets the chance to use their language skills in real communicative situation. With the birth of social network sites in 2005 a number of studies on the role of these social networks have been conducted. Most of these researches have focused on relation between using SNS and enhancement of language learning skills. As SNS increases the chance of two-way communication and collaboration which is the essence of learning a language. Most of the recent studies related to this subject suggest that interaction through SNSs plays a crucial role in learning a second language especially English language and developing language skills.(Chartrand,2012; Harrison & Thomas,2009; Ofugi & Oliveira,2010 and Curcher,2009).

Social interaction

Social interaction is a mutual activity which re-

quires the involvement of at least two persons it also includes any social exchange between two or more individuals which helps them convey their messages to the others and let them communicate in different societies. Ellis(1999) defines interaction as a social behavior that occurs when one person communicates with another.

The most basic type of interaction is using gestures or various physical movements of the body. Then there are social behaviors, or social actions, which address (directly or indirectly) other people. Next are social contacts, a pair of social actions, which form the beginning of social interactions. Social interactions form the basis of social relations. These kinds of social interactions can be verbal, nonverbal, face-to-face or through Medias like SNSs. the kind of social interaction that we are trying to study and investigate its impact on language learning is interaction through SNSs.

Based on interaction hypothesis (Long,1996), second language acquisition is promoted by interaction and communication. Although there's independence between English language learning and social interaction it enables learners to adjust themselves to English spoken environments. In this regard Long(1983) and Vygotsky(1987) cited in Mousa(2007) argued that second language learning can happen through social interaction and oral communication. According to Long's(1983)Interaction hypothesis theory the interactional collaboration among learners and teachers can lead to second language learning. As we know language acquisition needs negotiation of meaning in target language in form of natural communication in which the speaker is not concerned with the form of the utterance but the meaning he is trying to convey, so getting involved in social interactions not only makes language learner motivated to use their language skills but also it promotes meaningful communication in target language. Besides Hatch in late 1970s mentioned that learners learn the structure of a language through interaction rather than learning grammar in order to interact.

Social Network Site (SNS)

Abbreviated as SNS a social networking site is the phrase used to describe any Web site that enables users to create public profiles within that Web site and form relationships with other users of the same Web site who access their profile. It's a Web

site that provides an opportunity for people to share their activities with family, friends and colleagues or to share their interest in a particular topic. Members create an online profile with biographical data, photos and any other information they choose to post. They communicate with each other by making their latest thoughts public in a blog-like format or via e-mail, instant messaging, voice or video-conferencing to selected members. Social networking sites can be used to describe community-based Web sites, online discussions forums, chat rooms and other social spaces online in which the users can communicate whether in pair or in groups.

Types of social SNSs

Today, learning English involves much more than studying a textbook and doing tests. With the birth of the Internet the users felt the need to improve their English skills. These necessities involve interacting with others online via social networks - communicating in order to learn about other cultures, have fun, and to learn English at the same time. People are increasingly conversing online using diverse social sites. They enjoy the immediacy and convenience of engaging in discourse any time, any place, anywhere.

Forums: Probably one of the first sites to allow for social interaction, forums have been around for a while. Forums are typically comprised of people with a similar interest. Users have conversations around a particular given topic and build up relationships with each other. They provide a great deal of information about a topic and is a great way to share your knowledge.

Blogs: People like to journal, and with the internet they wanted to share their lives more openly. Originally called web-logs, these personal journals have advanced. Some personal journals still exist, while other blogs discuss a particular niche or interest.

Micro-Blogging: Similar to blogs, this is a micro journal of what is happening right now. These sites can share what is going on in an individual life or can be information the individual wants to share. Major news events are now breaking online via microblogs. The best known microblog is Twitter.

Photo Sharing: Social Networking Sites are known for sharing of information, in this case photos. Users upload their pictures to Photo Sharing Sites. Rather than having to send individual pictures to family, you send a single link. You can tag your photos with keywords related to the image and allow people to comment. Some popular photo

sharing sites are Flickr and Picasa.

Video Sharing: YouTube is the video sharing site that almost everyone has seen. Videos are shared online, keywords are added so people can search for those terms or for the video title. People can comment if the video owner allows. Like other forms of social media it allows for a more personal look of the actual user.

Professional: Networking has long been touted as an asset in professional circles. Networking allows the person to connect with people and by those connections meet other professionals that person knows. Professional social media allows for that type of opportunity online. Thus if you move away from your home town you can still remain connected to your ex-coworkers and others in your profession. Linked In is one of the top professional social networking sites.

Social: After you have worked with people a while, they may become your friends. Then you have friends from church, from your school, and friends you have met in a wide variety of ways. Social networking sites are about being social, so there are sites purely for allowing users to stay in touch with people whom they know. While MySpace was the leader, the current leader is Facebook. It is growing around the world.

Bookmarking: The major purpose of these social networking sites is the sharing of information. If you read a web page that is interesting, informative, or inspirational you may choose to bookmark it. By doing this you are saying that you like it. Your friends will learn what you liked and can choose to read it. Pages that many people bookmark become popular and drive others to that page as well. There are other types of social networking sites out there, some are very similar to the ones mentioned here. Many sites have a major form of socializing and then use the other types as other ways for users to interact. People love to socialize and interact, so this is a growing field with ever more sites.

Twitter: Twitter is a social networking site that demands precision of expression. It's because each post or "Tweet" you can make is limited to 140 characters. Therefore, you must be concise in your messaging. As a micro-blogging service, Twitter asks the question "What's happening?" With Twitter, you let others know what you're doing. You can immediately update others on the latest about you and your interests, and with only 140 characters available per message, you're forced to choose your words carefully and to convey your message clearly.

This is excellent for improving your English as you eliminate unnecessary words. Like writing poetry, you choose the best words to communicate with. With Twitter, you send your Tweets to your Friends or Followers, and you can follow other people who interest you, and read their Tweets, which are also short. In this way Twitter helps you improve your English reading skills too. You can read a variety of short messages on different subjects. In this way, you learn new words, phrase, and jargon, which all help you build your English vocabulary.

Facebook: Facebook is a social networking service in which users can create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages. This includes automatic notifications when they update their personal profile. Facebook users can also join common-interest user groups that they find useful. Facebook is a website for keeping in touch with others. You choose whom you allow to access your Facebook pages. You can post text, pictures, images, video, and music on your Facebook page. You can use a “Wall”, which other members can use in order to text each other messages. In addition to text, messages can also contain photos, videos, music and links to other websites. Again, this is an excellent mechanism for building your English skills. You gain English writing experience through composing your various messages. You are not limited to 140 characters, and so you can elaborate more on your messaging. Facebook also builds your English reading skills. You can read an assortment of messages from those whom you allow into your pages. This diversity of messages means you can learn new words from people all over the world, depending on your list of friends. Some may write extended messages, giving you the opportunity to study their way of writing, as well as their word choice. Facebook exposes you to a significant selection of writing (text) in which to build your English skills.

Skype: Skype is a computer software application that allows users to make voice calls over the Internet. Calls to other users of the Skype service are free. Skype allows you to talk, and/or text and add videos. You can use Skype on your computer, your mobile device, or on your TV, depending on the model of TV you have. As concerns improving your English skills, Skype gets you talking. Consequently, you converse, which is putting your English speaking and listening skills into action. Just as you do in-person, you chat and get your message across verbally. You use the English vocabulary, which you’ve built up along with those new words

and phrases that you’ve learned. Of course, you can text on Skype, which lets you practice your English writing skills just as you do on other social networking sites, but its main strength is using it for voice or and video chats.

YouTube: YouTube is a video-sharing website. Users upload, share and view videos on this social networking site. Learning English via YouTube involves listening to the language via the videos you view. You also learn through reading the comments posted in English, situated below each video. In addition, some YouTube videos are text presentations in a slide show format, or have subtitles available, so you can actually read English in each screen shot.

Role of SNS in language learning

Recent observations and studies suggest that certain amount of learning a second language takes place while communicating through social networks (Mills,2011). The internet has the potential to provide the language learner with vast resources of authentic written, audio and video materials for learners, also social networking websites have created opportunities for language learners to increase authentic way that was previously difficult to achieve.(Chartrand,2012). In the same way SMLL social media language learning and CALL computer assisted language learning help students to develop communication and their language skills. As learning a second language involves social interactions using social network sites can play a crucial role in learning target language. Curcher (2009) in a research focusing on increasing second language skill in college students using SNSs believes that the use of educational technologies, in particular the use of social networking sites contributes to development of language skills in communities like language classes. Another study reveals that using SNS by non-native to non-native speakers of English NNS-NNS increases the chance of negotiation of meaning comparing to native speaker to non-native speaker NS-NNS interaction through SNSs. (Dalton, 2011). Also much research has been done on use of social networks as a learning tool in English as a foreign language classroom (e.g. Ofugi & Oliveira 2010) determines that the use of internet and facebook makes student more in contact with English language and it helps them to develop their writing skill and enhance their vocabulary range.

Harrison & Thomas (2009) also found that different SNSs offer to transform language learning by providing environments that allow new mode of active language learning. In recent years language

teachers and researchers have given more attention to changing learning environments from limited , teacher centered classes to more communicative and interactive environments in which language learners can use their language skills in real life situations. According to Curcher (2009), the use of social networking websites moves the learning from beyond the classroom and its formal setting and it gives the learners the ability to mix formal and informal language .

Although most of the recent studies conducted in this regard agree on the fact that language learners through new technology can produce more meaningful output (Chartrand 2012) .

However Harrison and Thomas (2009) indicated that some SNS systems and personal learning environments beside providing language learner an opportunity of meaningful communication , it helps them gain invaluable data and insights about a foreign language. In this regard, Chartrand (2012) indicates that a number of students do not enjoy learning with computers and do not attempt to study outside the classroom. But at the end all these studies and a lot more make it clear that using SNS as a language teaching tool and making language learning environment more communicative reinforce language learning.

Methodology

Participants

This study is an effort to investigate the effect of social interaction through social networking sites by EFL learners, studying English in Qalame Bartar language institute. Forty intermediate level participants (24 females and 16 males) were chosen from ages between 18 to 35 years old, who were studying English in institute and were familiar with the use of computer and internet, some of them were already using some SNSs but not particularly with the aim of learning English or enhancing their language skills. These participants were divided into two groups, one joined SNS group and received the treatment (treatment group) and another group did not receive the treatment and only attended in the class (control group).

Instruments

Language proficiency test (Nelson): This test comprised of 50 multiple-choice items related to grammar. In order to test the reliability of the proficiency test, a pilot study was carried out on 20 students. Its reliability through the K-R21 formula

turned out to be .74, which was appropriate to take the next step.

Pretest and Posttest: The instrument used in this study as pre-test and posttest was an English language test of grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension taken from www.transparent.com to evaluate the treatment group's English proficiency after attending SNS for two months. This test was based on the standard English vocabulary and English grammar, so this test can measure subject's command of the English language who attended social network site beside taking English language classes. The T-test was administered to the treatment group after a period of 60 days attending the group and discussing the different topics related to their course book learning subjects, and 2 open-ended questions:

1- How did you interact on Facebook group during this course?

2- Did you feel that the use of social network group was a valuable English learning experience? How?

Going through K-R21 formula, it was indicated that this test was reliable enough (.69) for the respective goal in the present study. The pretest and posttest were the same. There was a one-month interval between pretest and posttest.

Procedure

First, the Nelson proficiency test was given to 70 participants selected for the purpose of this study. Then, based on the results of the test, 40 students, who placed between one standard deviation above and below the mean were regarded as the main participants. After dividing these 40 participants to 2 groups', the pretest was given to the students in both groups. Then, regarding the students in experimental group, facebook SNS were introduced to these language learners and they were encouraged to use this site as a learning tool. They used the discussion board and wall to post their opinions and ideas on subjects related to their course book subject. During this period, language learners were interviewed to make sure they are motivated in participating in such kind of electronic, internet based social environments in order to develop their English language skills or they preferred to limit their learning to classes. Almost 80% of the students felt motivated and preferred to spend more time on these networks and discuss their language learning issues. They even got interested to discuss the ideas occurred to them related their language learning inside their classes and go beyond the course

book material. After attending this SNS group for 60 days, the same pretest focusing on all aspects of language skill administered to both treatment and control group and the result were compared and analyzed by considering the research question.

Result and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of interaction via social network site on enhancement of language learning in Iranian EFL learners. The research question addressed in this study was whether communicating via SNS could enhance language learning in EFL learners or not. To achieve this language proficiency test was administered to the subjects of treatment group as a T-test. To summarize the findings and to achieve the purpose of the study, the descriptive statistics (mean and std. deviation) resulted from the test given to participants are presented in tables below.

Table 1. Paired Sample t-test for pre and posttest in control and experimental group

Group	Test	Mean	S.D	T	Sig
Control	Pre	2.34	.732	11.142	.226
	Post	2.48	.678		
Experimental	Pre	2.16	.763	14.711	.004
	Post	3.46	.722		

Note * $p < .01$, ** $p < .005$

As it is evident from the above table, there is no significant difference between subjects in control group in pre- and posttest in Iranian context ($t=11.142$; $P=.226$). Regarding the results of control group contexts, we can draw this conclusion that if any significant difference is reported between subjects in the experimental groups, it can be attributed to the effect of interaction through social network site.

With regard to the results of the experimental group of Iranian sample, paired sample 't' test indicated a significant difference from pretest to posttest ($t=14.711$; $P=.004$). With respect to these results, we can verify interaction through social network site can play a significant role enhancing English language learning in Iranian EFL context

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research was to ex-

plore the effect of SNS on enhancement of language learning in EFL learners. The finding suggests that using SNS groups like Facebook can be very useful as an educational tool. Students welcome using social networking sites as supplementary to the curriculum. The result of the test shows that participants of the treatment group could improve their language skills. The findings of this study point to the fact that although interaction plays a fundamental role in learning a language and provides the learners with a good opportunity not only to improve and expand their L2 competence, but also to discuss and share their view points with their peers and with their teachers in the English language classes. In conclusion, Facebook is becoming an essential part of students' daily life and they can use it effectively as a language learning tool while interacting with their peers and friends. When learning experiences are facilitated with online SNS groups students can learn while having fun, and that makes language learning a more interesting activity. Giving students topics related to their real life to discuss makes them more interested because they find it easier to discuss in a way that makes it easier for them to write and produce correct grammatical and more comprehensible sentences.

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