

Social Media in English Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract—This study first shares our case of using social media in English language teaching and secondly, explores students' use of social media for English learning and the relationships between six possible frequent learning activities through social media. In this case, YouTube, Blogs, Forums and Wikis have been widely used in teaching. The findings, with a sample (N=122) of 16.5% of respondents, revealed that YouTube (M=3.65, SD=1.33) is the most prominent tool being used both daily and weekly, and Wikis (M=2.52, SD=1.42) were mainly used on a weekly basis. As the unofficial learning tools, Facebook (M=2.60, SD=1.62) and WhatsApp (M=2.40, SD=1.68) could possibly reflect students' preference of tools for English learning. Apart from that, the most frequent activities through social media among six were required (M=3.97, SD=1.05) and non-required (M=4.15, SD=0.88) course-related materials acquisitions in terms of constructive informal learning. Students were found to favor using social media with classmates (M=3.62, SD=1.20) over teachers (M=2.76, SD=1.26); in other words, those platforms induce more student-student than student-teacher interactions. Moreover, the high correlation ($r=.804$, $p<.01$) between students' sharing with and obtaining materials from each other to complete assignments explains a high connection of social exchange activities among students. Educators are advised while endeavoring to promote knowledge sharing in terms of collaborative learning, simultaneously, to raise students' awareness of academic integrity and also provide proper training.

Index Terms—social media, YouTube, facebook, wikis, WhatsApp, English learning, materials sharing, informal learning, peer interactions

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the annual report of social media used by higher education faculty 2013 conducted by Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group [1], the use of social media in teaching has grown 21% from 2012 to 2013 in the United States. Over three quarters of the respondents reported the increase in the impact of digital communication has had on their communication with students. Percentages of the use of social media personally and for teaching were 70% versus 41%. Wikis and Blogs were found to be the most popular tools used in teaching, and Facebook was commonly used for personal use.

In English language teaching, the use of social media has evolved over the years. Wikis, Forums or Blogs have been mainly used for collaborative writing, e.g. [2], [3] and [4], facilitating writing process, e.g. [5] and [6]. Quite a few research studies have studied the use of Facebook as a learning environment, e.g. [7]-[9], some in English writing, e.g. [10] or online discussion, e.g. [11], and also the use of YouTube in classroom teaching, e.g. [12] and [13], its affordance, e.g. [14] and its use in English literature, e.g. [15]. The influence of social media in English language teaching should no longer be neglected.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

A. Background

We are an English teaching unit in a university in Hong Kong. Early in 2003, right after the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau's announcement of class cancellation for all educational institutions due to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, we started equipping our class lessons online swiftly by adopting the streaming technology. During the SARS period, there was no interruption of classes - students watched video lectures at home, and then completed weekly tasks and out-of-class assignments. That was, in fact, the initial stage of today's blended learning.

Forums, Blogs and RSS feed on eLearn (an e-learning platform built originally from Moodle) have been exploited as a form of out-of-class online activities for students since 2006. The department continuously adopts new elements for teaching and learning, e.g. setting up a YouTube channel for delivering video lessons, utilizing DropBox, Google or One drive for students to share their presentation files, and encouraging students' collaborative writing through Wiki (Moodle's built-in Wiki). The department created a YouTube channel in August 2011, and has produced and uploaded 237 videos, accumulating over 300K views and 900 subscribers up to spring 2016.

B. Teachers' Sharing of Their use of Social Media in English Language Teaching

A case of using Facebook: A teacher of the department had a positive experience with Facebook while teaching a course of English in the Workplace with a group project component for engineering students.

Since the assessments were in the form of a project, requiring students to form a company and design a brochure to promote a product, the teacher suggested that his students set up a company Facebook page for group work. This helped to bring the project to life. Since all students were already on Facebook and in the habit of communicating with each other through this channel, they found it easy and intuitive to communicate and collaborate in this way. He informed his students that they might add him to their group if they wanted him to see their progress and provide feedback comments. He could easily give quick feedback comments, re-upload a file with feedback, or simply encourage students by clicking the “like” button. Students would often reply to his feedback with follow-up questions and they made use of the private message function to ask questions about the course, which he could answer quickly both inside and outside the classroom using the class computer or iPhone.

The teacher also opened a class Facebook page and used the page to make class announcements and to share extra materials (e.g. YouTube videos). Interestingly, students are still using the page after the course finished to keep in touch with each other and organize class dinners. Even these “informal” messages are always posted in English as they know that their teacher cannot understand Cantonese. End of course student feedback was positive (4.8 SFQ score) and student comments reflected that they enjoyed using Facebook in the class as it gave them a new learning experience where they had got into the habit of using English outside the classroom as well as during class time.

A case of using diverse social media tools: Another teacher has used Dropbox, Google Drive, Socrative, Poll Everywhere, Padlet, and the Blog, Forum and Wiki tools provided on our e-learning platform (eLearn) in his teaching with students from all his classes as well as with fellow teachers. He has shared documents using Dropbox and Google Drive, while he has used Google Forms to survey students and teachers. Socrative’s quizzes were used to check students’ understanding of the subject matter. Poll Everywhere and Padlet were both used for brainstorming activities. The eLearn Blogs, Forums and Wikis were used for sharing information, discussions and collaborative work such as group writing.

His main selection criterion of social media in teaching is “ease of use” for both teachers and students, and also, that there is no registration or account creation needed for students prior to them using the services. For example, he has an account with Socrative where he creates the quizzes, but students only need the Socrative student URL and Socrative room number to answer the quiz questions. They do not need to create an account or remember a password.

Student reactions when starting the various quizzes were overwhelmingly positive. They have an attachment to their mobile device and they enjoy being allowed to use them in a constructive way during the class. The only issues are the compatibility of certain devices, flat batteries, or weak WiFi in particular classrooms. These are all solved by getting students to share a device. He is

also conscious of not overusing the different social media during a class, using it at most twice during a 3 hours’ class.

C. Students’ use of Social Media for Learning

Some of our teachers have benefited from teaching in an informal but constructive environment by making use of social media. Students may use YouTube for the subject-related materials and also utilize the eLearn’s Blog, Forum or Wiki tools because of the subject requirements, or access Facebook or other social media tools for their own learning practice. In fact, the integration of formal and informal learning has been suggested as a way to enhance formal language learning [16]. Also it has been found to be a promising approach to support students’ self-regulated learning [17]. Students were not only using Facebook formally for required course-related learning by peer interactions (student-student), but also informally for non-required course-related matters [18]. Except these, students might have their own preference of the tools and access frequency for English learning. In addition, social media facilitate communication and encourage swift sharing among users [19]. It could possibly induce students to share materials with each other via their favorite social media channels in order to complete their assignments or homework.

The author of the current study is curious not only about the tools, but also students’ learning patterns by using social media, their use of social media as a form of informal learning, the use with their classmates and teachers, and also the materials acquisition for academic achievement.

III. METHOD

Eight sets of questions, as below, were set up and eleven social media tools (Blogs, Forums, Wikis, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Weibo, WeChat, WhatsApp and YouTube) were included in the survey. An online questionnaire was designed to capture the situation of students’ use of social media for English learning. Students were invited to join the survey by email. Only the respondents who used social media for English learning were screened out for the study. The survey questions are:

1. How often do you use **\$social media** for English learning?
2. Do you use **\$social media** daily, weekly, monthly or do not use for English learning?
3. How often do you use social media for the required course-related materials?
4. How often do you use social media for the non-required course-related materials?
5. How often do you use social media with your classmates for learning?
6. How often do you use social media with your teacher for learning?
7. How often do you use social media to share materials, including but not limited to information, links, files, etc., to classmates for them to complete assignments?

8. How often do you use social media to obtain materials, including but not limited to information, links, files, etc., from classmates to complete your assignments?

Social media: The eleven social media tools separately

IV. RESULT

Of the 741 complete data received, 122 students were found to be using social media for English language learning. The valid response rate is 16.5%. In the sample (N=122), 72 and 50 are female and male students respectively (female-male ratio is 3:2).

A. The Tools of Social Media for English Learning

According to the mean scores provided in Table I, students' most popular tool for English learning is YouTube (M=3.65, SD=1.33). They also used Facebook (M=2.60, SD=1.62), Wikis (M=2.52, SD=1.42) and WhatsApp (M=2.40, SD=1.68) but were unlikely to use LinkedIn and Weibo (with mean scores below 1.5 and small standard deviation) to learn English. No great difference of the mean scores between genders in terms of the four popular tools for English learning was found; nevertheless, female students using WhatsApp and Facebook were slightly more often than male students on average.

TABLE I. THE MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (SD) OF THE USE FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

	Female (N=72)		Male (N=50)		Overall (N=122)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Blogs	1.89	1.23	1.93	1.41	1.91	1.3
Forums	2.06	1.34	2.09	1.37	2.07	1.35
Wikis	2.52	1.33	2.52	1.55	2.52	1.42
Facebook	2.63	1.6	2.55	1.67	2.6	1.62
Instagram	1.89	1.57	1.64	1.33	1.79	1.47
LinkedIn	1.26	0.86	1.21	0.82	1.24	0.84
Twitter	1.63	1.25	1.72	1.46	1.67	1.33
Weibo	1.31	0.91	1.27	0.89	1.3	0.9
WeChat	1.82	1.46	1.77	1.35	1.8	1.41
WhatsApp	2.46	1.69	2.31	1.67	2.4	1.68
YouTube	3.63	1.29	3.67	1.4	3.65	1.33

Rating from "do not use" to "use very often" to be ranked from 1 - 5 (mid-point is 3)

B. Habit of Using Social Media for English Learning

Three quarters of students (36% daily and 39% weekly), as shown in Table II, used YouTube for English learning, followed by Facebook (21% each for daily and weekly) and WhatsApp (20% each for daily and weekly). Wikis were found to be used weekly (27%) or monthly (23%) rather than daily (12%). Forums were more commonly used monthly (22%) than weekly (16%). An equal percentage of students (16%) used Blogs on both a weekly and monthly basis. Although about three quarters of students did not use Twitter, Instagram and WeChat to

learn English, there were still 17% and 13% of female students, respectively, using Instagram and WeChat daily, and 14% of male students using Twitter daily.

TABLE II. THE PERCENTAGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA (DAILY/WEEKLY) FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Female (N=72)			Male (N=50)		Overall (N=122)	
Use for English learning daily						
1	YouTube	35%	YouTube	38%	YouTube	36%
2	Facebook	21%	Facebook	22%	Facebook	21%
3	WhatsApp	21%	WhatsApp	20%	WhatsApp	20%
4	Instagram	17%	Wikis	16%	Instagram	14%
5	WeChat	13%	Twitter	14%	Wikis	12%
Use for English learning weekly						
1	YouTube	38%	YouTube	40%	YouTube	39%
2	Wikis	28%	Wikis	26%	Wikis	27%
3	Facebook	22%	Blogs	20%	Facebook	21%
4	WhatsApp	22%	Facebook	20%	WhatsApp	20%
5	Blogs	14%	Forums	20%	Forums/Blogs	16%
Use for English learning monthly						
1	Wikis	29%	Forums	18%	Wikis	23%
2	Forums	25%	Wikis	14%	Forums	22%
3	Blogs	22%	Facebook	10%	Blogs	16%
4	YouTube	18%	...	6% or below	Facebook	13%
5	Facebook	15%			YouTube	13%
Do not use for English learning						
1	LinkedIn	90%	LinkedIn	92%	LinkedIn	91%
2	Weibo	88%	Weibo	90%	Weibo	89%
3	Twitter	76%	Instagram	78%	Twitter	77%
4	Instagram	74%	Twitter	78%	Instagram	75%
5	WeChat	74%	WeChat	72%	WeChat	73%

TABLE III. MEAN SCORES OF USE FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE FOLLOWING LEARNING BEHAVIORS

	Female (N=72)		Male (N=50)		Overall (N=122)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Use social media to acquire required and non-required course-related materials						
a. Required materials	4.06	1.06	3.85	1.04	3.97	1.05
b. Non-required materials	4.22	0.89	4.04	0.85	4.15	0.88
2. Use social media with classmates and teachers for learning						
a. With classmates	3.67	1.21	3.56	1.2	3.62	1.2
b. With teachers	2.93	1.22	2.52	1.29	2.76	1.26
3. Share and obtain information, links or files through social media to complete assignments						
a. Share to classmates	3.69	1.2	3.53	1.27	3.62	1.22
b. Obtain from classmates	3.74	1.18	3.61	1.26	3.69	1.21

Rating from "never" to "very often" to be ranked from 1 - 5 (mid-point is 3)

C. Students' Learning Activities through Social Media

Students were found to be, as shown in Table III, frequently using social media for both required (1a) (M=3.97, SD=1.05) and non-required course-related materials (1b) (M=4.15, SD=0.88) for learning. Students also frequently shared (3a) (M=3.62, SD=1.22) and obtained materials (3b) (M=3.69, SD=1.21) with each other in order to complete their assignments (the mean

scores and standard deviations are very close). An obvious students' inclination to interact with peers ($M=3.62$, $SD=1.20$) rather than teachers ($M=2.76$, $SD=1.26$) was demonstrated. Female students, in overall, were more actively using social media for these six measured learning activities than male students.

D. The Linear Relationships between the Six Learning Activities through Social Media

Table IV indicates that the six learning activities are all positively correlated with one another, meaning that the increase in the use frequency of one activity, the other in pair tends to increase in a linear fashion. The use frequency of social media with classmates (2a) has the highest dependence individually with required (1a) ($r=.464$, $p<.01$) and non-required materials acquisitions (1b) ($r=.370$, $p<.01$) and also the use with teachers (2b) ($r=.391$, $p<.01$).

The use frequency of social media to share materials to classmates for them to complete assignments (3a) and to obtain materials shared by classmates to complete own assignments (3b) was highly correlated ($r=.804$, $p<.01$). That means 65% (r^2 or coefficient of determination) of the variation is shared between the use frequencies of social media to share and obtain materials to and from classmates to complete assignments. The causal relation between them is unknown in the study but these two activities can possibly be seen as one single variable of students' action rather than two, such as, materials exchange.

Furthermore, students' use frequency of social media for required course-related materials has higher dependence with all the other learning activities than non-required one, and it is moderately associated with the use frequency of social media with classmates for learning ($r=.464$, $p<.01$) and mildly correlated with sharing ($r=.375$, $p<.01$) and obtaining materials ($r=.386$, $p<.01$) through social media for completing assignments.

TABLE IV. LINEAR CORRELATION OF USE FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE SIX MEASURED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

	N=122	1a	1b	2a	2b	3a
Use frequency of social media						
1a for required course-related materials.						
1b for non-required course-related materials.		.285**				
2a with classmates for learning.		.464**	.370**			
2b with teachers for learning.		.288**	.225*	.391**		
3a to share materials for classmates to complete assignments.		.375**	.294**	.389**	.250**	
3b to obtain materials from classmates to complete assignments.		.386**	.336**	.365**	.330**	.804**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

V. DISCUSSION

About the tools:

A. Official and Unofficial Tools

There is no surprise that YouTube is students' most frequently used tool for English language learning because the department has created a number of videos for teaching purpose. With addition of the three Moodle built-in tools: Wiki, Forum and Blog, these have been the four so-called official teaching and learning tools used in the department. As reported in Table I, the use frequencies of these four tools between genders were nearly the same; conversely, that of Facebook and WhatsApp (the tools used on voluntary basis) between genders were slightly different. Since students' use of the four official tools for English learning were more or less guided through a set program, the use frequencies might be influenced by the amount of the activities created in the type of social media instead of students' preference. Under this circumstance, the use frequencies of the unofficial tools (i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp) could more likely reflect students' preference of tools being used to learn English. Gender difference in the use frequencies of Facebook and WhatsApp could also explain the divergences (even though they are small) between female and male students.

B. Use Patterns for English Learning (Daily or Weekly)

Based on the high percentages of both daily and weekly users, YouTube was identified as the top English learning tool of our students. Facebook was also highly used on both a daily and weekly basis while Wikis were likely to be used on a weekly basis. For daily use, besides the top three tools (i.e. YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp), female students were inclined to use Instagram whereas male students used Wikis. For weekly use, except the top three tools (i.e. YouTube, Wikis and Facebook), more female students used WhatsApp while more male students used Forums or Blogs.

About the learning activities:

C. Exchanging Materials as Social Exchange Behaviour

The more the students shared materials (including information, files, links...) via social media for classmates to complete assignments the more they obtained materials from classmates to complete their own assignments, and vice versa. Such actions are a kind of social exchange activities. It is reciprocal to a certain extent when students receive benefits from classmates and they do the same in return. In this case, the frequencies of students' sharing and obtaining materials (i.e. exchanging materials) with each other, on average, are above the mid-point and tend to 'often' but not 'very often'. That seems to be acceptable and normal. Students exchanging what they have learnt or the materials that they find useful is a good sign of collaborative learning; only if they excessively share and use materials from others without critical thinking or proper citation that could possibly reduce creativity for the former case or result in plagiarism for the latter in the context of academic writing.

D. Informal Learning

Students were keen to obtain both required and non-required (especially for the latter) course-related materials through social media for learning. However, their dependence with one another (i.e. required and non-required materials acquisitions) is mild. Also, the increase in frequency of non-required materials acquisition, comparing with that for required materials, has relatively less dependence with the frequencies of sharing materials for classmates to complete assignments and the use with classmates, but similar dependence with the frequencies of obtaining materials for assignment purpose and the use with teachers. That explains why with students looking for either required or non-required materials, their use of social media with teachers and obtaining materials through such channels would have very little difference; however, there were differences when using social media with classmates, and through that means to share materials with peers for them to complete assignments.

E. Peer Interactions

The frequency, on average, of students using social media with classmates has the highest dependence with the frequency for required materials acquisition. Additionally, the increase in frequency of using social media with classmates in terms of peer interactions has obvious higher correlation than the use with teachers, with the learning activities of non-required materials acquisition and sharing materials with classmates to complete assignments, and their strength of dependencies are very close. Conversely, students' use of social media with teachers for learning has relative less implication with the activities except materials acquisition from classmates to complete assignments. Nevertheless, social media, at least at this moment, seem likely to be the tools that are encouraging student-student rather than student-teacher interactions in an informal learning environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

Most notable of all perhaps is the obvious high frequencies of materials acquisitions (required and non-required) through social media (most likely, officially with YouTube or Wikis, and unofficially with Facebook or WhatsApp) in terms of mixed formal and informal learning. Apart from that, the high frequencies of students using social media to share and obtain materials with each other to complete assignments, in addition to the high correlation between them illustrate that students, more or less, were goal-oriented - materials acquisition for assignment purpose. Comparing with the other learning activities, sharing and obtaining materials (i.e. materials exchange) are perhaps, the most consistent students' activities in their learning practice through the means of social media. Although the department and class teachers have influenced the use of social media in teaching, students' use for their learning would totally be out of their control as seen by the high intention of non-required course-related materials acquisition from students via the unofficial channels and the use with their peers. In our case, the department has implemented

precautions to prevent plagiarism, including the provision of referencing training to students and the adoption of tools for similarity checking of students' assignments. In the beneficial way, students effectively use their favorite channels for knowledge exchange in order to facilitate a valuable quality of learning. Let's just welcome the new era of learning. No worries but take precautions!

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