

A Systematic Review on Informal Learning of English Language via Facebook

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Abstract

Methods of learning have changed in the 21st century as the use of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blog is becoming popular. This paper aims to critically analyse and discuss scientific research on the informal learning of English language through one of these sites. It is hoped that this systematic review will advance our understanding of the necessary typical conditions for effective informal learning through networking sites. Two research questions were formulated: (1) Is Facebook an efficient learning environment for students to facilitate informal learning of English?; and (2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook for the informal learning? Three databases were explored and over 60 relevant academic journal articles were found. However, only 20 articles met the inclusion criteria of this systematic review. The analysis shows that there are still many disadvantages and challenges, such as privacy and miscommunication that may prevent a complete adoption of Facebook as a learning environment, yet it is a potential platform for students to facilitate their informal learning of English. It is recommended that language learners are made aware of all the advantages and disadvantages of informal learning through networking sites so that they can take appropriate actions to regulate their learning experience.

Keywords: Facebook, informal learning, language learning, social networking site, social learning, systematic review

Introduction

With the rapid development of information technology, we have entered into information- and knowledge-based society. The quick improvement and inventions of modern educational technology offer amplified chances for informal learning. Jokisalo and Riu (2009) point out that 80 per cent of the knowledge we gain comes from informal learning and only 20 per cent comes from formal learning.

In informal learning, learners have control over the learning procedure and its outcomes. The learning process is not only self-directed and self-regulated; it is also shared and collaborative (Rashid, Rahman & Rahman, 2016). Learners can exchange information with each other and make the information increasingly useful and significant to them through their co-operative endeavours (Yunus, Mohamad & Waelateh, 2016). Thereby, the importance of informal learning should not be ignored.

Informal learning can be defined as a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire information from daily experience and the educational influences and resources in his or her environment (Foley, 1999). It is commenced by the needs of the individual learner to secure new information and skills and improve the existing ones (Pozgaj & Vlahovic, 2010). Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and Twitter, make the Internet environment more interactive and easier to explore, and facilitate learners' to learn informally as well as enable users to share information quickly, collaborate, and communicate with one another (Rashid and Rahman, 2014).

In the recent history of information and communication technologies, the proliferation of SNSs is most relevant phenomenon. Of the various online SNSs, Facebook is now the most popular, with one billion active users per month (Facebook, 2012). To date, Facebook has received significant attention from some research areas, ranging from social and behavioural sciences, economics and business marketing. Definitely, in the social sciences there is an enormous amount of research about the implications of social networking platform for identity and self-presentation (e.g. Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Rashid et al., 2016), friendship articulation (e.g. Rashid, 2016a; Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans & Stefanone, 2010; Zwier, Araujo, Boukes & Willemsen, 2011) and privacy concerns (e.g. boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Waters & Ackerman, 2011), that recently resulted in a systematic review of the literature related to the networking sites (e.g. Wilson, Marin, Rhea, Wilson, Loenneke & Anderson, 2012).

Some studies suggest that SNSs are mainly used in education as tools to support existing social relationships and facilitating the maintenance of social capital (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011), but their value as an informal learning environment is still questioned. On the one hand, scholars have admonished against using Facebook for educational purposes (e.g. Selwyn, 2009). Since students seem to be unwilling to use it for academic purposes, it is proposed that the concentration should move away from its educational uses and ponder Facebook as a place for socialization (Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley, 2009). On the other hand, scholars have highlighted the potential of SNSs for informal learning in so far as they would support "the process of building networks of information, contacts and resources that are applied to real problems" (Anderson & Dron, 2011, p. 87). As pointed out by Siemens (2005), the shift of emphasis from the group to the network as the locus of learning depends on a concept of

education based on exploration, connection, creation and evaluation within networks that connect people, digital artefacts, and content. This review attempts (1) to examine whether Facebook is an efficient platform to facilitate informal learning of English and (2) to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of informal learning through the site.

Review Framework

This study aims to critically analyse and discuss scientific research on the informal learning of English through SNSs. For this purpose, Vygotsky's (1978a) sociocultural theory was used as the framework in investigating the features of informal learning in the social media environment. Sociocultural theory proposes that human behaviours are affected by their social and cultural factors. Rooted in the sociocultural theory is the social perspective on learning, which emphasizes the collaborative context of learning and that learners can select for themselves what they need to learn. Vygotsky (1981a) puts forth that learning is situated in social activities. Individuals develop their knowledge by engaging in various types of social activities. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) add that people can learn more through taking part in different kinds of joint activities as they can combine various influences into their new modes of understanding and involvement.

The main claim in sociocultural theory is that individual development, including higher mental functioning, originates in social sources. This is based on the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978b) and the genetic law of development (Vygotsky, 1981b). Vygotsky (1978a) defines the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p.86).

Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD relates to the “assessment of intelligence” and the “organisation of instruction” (Wertsch, 1991, p.28). With regard to the assessment of intelligence, Vygotsky argues that the same emphasis should be placed on the level of potential development as the level of actual development. Vygotsky argues that instructions “should be tied more closely” to potential development than actual development (Wertsch, 1991, p.28). More capable peers can thus help other individuals to further develop their capabilities. This is because human development is the “product of a broader system than just the system of a person's individual functions, specifically, systems of social connections and relations, of collected forms of behavior and social cooperation” (Vygotsky, 1999, p.41). Based on the concept of the ZPD, it is reasonable to suggest that the social interaction and collaboration afforded by Facebook Timelines provides an opportunity for learners to develop themselves. Their potential development can be enhanced with the guidance and support of Friends, hence enabling them to solve problems which could be difficult for them to solve independently.

As a form of social learning theory for the new digital age, Siemens (2004; 2005) and Downes (2007) have proposed the theory of connectivism. Connectivism emphasizes how social learning today is often integrated with social media technologies. With the rapid development of social media, learning is not an individual activity. Today, learners often gather information by connecting to other people using SNSs. One of the tenets in connectivism is that the capacity to learn is more important than what is currently known (Siemens, 2004). Teachers' role, from the

perspective of connectivism, is not only to transmit knowledge to learners but also to form learning pathways and make connections with existing and new knowledge resources (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

Material and methods

The review process encompassed of the four phases described below.

Formulation of inclusion and exclusion criteria

Before searching for the literature, the following inclusion criteria were formulated. First, each journal article should be relevant, meaning that the publication should examine informal learning of English through SNSs within the scope of the conceptual review framework. Second, the academic journal articles are written only in English, as we can read and understand this language. Lastly, the time extent of the literature search was limited to 2005–2016 to give an overview of the most recent research in this area.

Improvement of a search strategy

To develop a search strategy appropriately to the main purpose of this review, various search terms were listed, such as informal learning, social learning, technology enhanced language learning, e-learning, and social networking site. After heedful contemplation of the consequences of removing potential search terms, the following search terms were identified as being the most informative: informal learning, learning environment, Facebook and social networking site. Quotation marks were also utilized to search for phrases.

Identification of relevant publications

Three databases were searched: the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) catalogue, the Web of Science (WoS), and the ScienceDirect. The abstracts of the academic journal articles resulting from the search strategy as mentioned above were screened for relevancy. If the abstract did not give adequate information, then the full text was scanned to determine whether or not the paper met the inclusion criteria.

Critical analysis and exploration

Following the careful reading, the critical analysis was carried out using a self-devised literature review form based on the examination framework adopted in this study. This provided the room for the explanation and evaluation of the found journal articles. The literature examination form also functioned to standardize the critical analysis. The procedure consisted of two parts: (a) questions aimed to provide acuteness into the research design features of the publications, thereby enabling the description of study into informal learning and (b) questions formulated to analyse the scientific research on the informal learning of English through Facebook.

Results and Discussion

Explanation of scientific research on the informal learning of English language through Facebook

The search resulted in 60 unique publications. Of these, 20 papers met the abovementioned criteria for inclusion. While two relevant publications reported on the same empirical study results, only the academic journal articles with the most extensive coverage were encompassed. Of those 20 relevant publications, 15 were empirical, and five were theoretical

studies. A total of 30 publications were not included as the papers describe individual faculty experiences, courses, curricula, or projects. Also excluded were five publications on a different topic. The majority of the reviewed journal articles were published in the twenty-first century and in the field of education.

Exploration of research questions

Is Facebook an efficient learning environment for students to facilitate informal learning of English?

Facebook is recently considered as the most popular platform for online social networking. It would be worthy to examine if there are activities that directly or indirectly lead to the learning of English. Students and teachers may use Facebook to upload files, photos, videos and other educational materials that are relevant to their course and learning (Rashid & Rahman, 2014). Given the widespread diffusion of Facebook among the students, many scholars outline the benefits of using the site for teaching and learning (e.g. Duffy, 2011; Greenhow, 2011; Halverson, 2011; Siemens & Weller, 2011). For instance, Greenhow (2011) and Siemens and Weller (2011) point out that Facebook is beneficial for learning as it facilitates discussion between learners who are geographically distributed.

Research has demonstrated that students use Facebook individually or in collaboration with their peers and instructors outside the classroom as an informal learning tool (Dogoriti & Pange, 2010; Smith, Caruso & Kim, 2010; Towner & Munoz, 2011). Students appear to make regular use of Facebook for course discussions much in the way they use the SNSs for social purposes (Estus, 2010).

Language learning is not limited to the formal learning setting of the classroom, and much language learning can occur informally, outside the classroom. SNSs offer an alternative informal, mobile environment with flexible teaching and learning that have no time constraints. Integrating Facebook in learning process may enhance students' interest, motivation and encourage collaboration between English language learners (Shih, 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; McBride, 2009; Karpati, 2009). We coincide with the view of Godwin-Jones (2008) that Facebook, which "enhances communication and human interaction can potentially be harnessed for language learning" (p. 7). Similarly, Blattner and Fiori (2009) also agreed that Facebook can provide opportunities to enhance the "development of socio-pragmatic competence in language learners" (p. 17).

Another recent study by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) found that, Facebook can be an online learning environment to facilitate students' English language learning in terms of (1) students' improvement of language skills and, (2) students' motivation, confidence and attitudes towards English language learning. Students in Kabilan et al.'s (2010) study have positive views and opinions regarding Facebook as it provides rich interaction and communication that the students have not experienced before. Such positive experience leads to the "increased confidence in language acquisition and a sense of connectedness" among the students (Wang & Chen, 2007, p.6). The positive views of the students regarding SNSs can be explained by Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of learning that it is a form of participation in a social world. People learn better in social settings and through authentic and relevant social interactions (Rashid,

2016b). Social online communities can be linked to this concept, whereby as a networked environment it allows and facilitates the necessary interactions that improve learning (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Learners need to read and write in order to communicate with their Friends on Facebook. Their confidence levels may increase as they write and read while they communicate on the site. As pointed by Hanlon (2007), the activities of reading and writing on networking sites may motivate and enhance students' confidence to communicate in English. Nadzrah and Mickan (2003) reveal that students are positive about the social networking platform as an online learning environment because by participating in SNSs, they can use the language freely without worrying about making writing mistakes. As highlighted by Gannon-Leary and Fontainha (2007) students can demonstrate their ability to assimilate into the sociocultural practices of their respective Facebook communities, gain knowledge and skills from the native users of the English language and engage in authentic written dialogues and conversations with them via such interactions between the expert (native users of English) and the novice (non-native users of English). This is a "neo-apprenticeship style learning, similar to that proposed by Vygotsky" (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007, p.3).

The review above contributes to our understanding that Facebook can be utilized as an online environment to facilitate informal learning of English. As suggested by Prensky (1998), we need to allow students to learn by themselves. Through Facebook students can explore and manage their learning of English with the help of other users on the site.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook as a platform for informal learning?

In general, the main benefit reported in several studies is that Facebook helps to create a learning environment which is: comfortable (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008), relaxing (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008), collaboration-oriented (Kessler, 2009; Lee, 2009, 2010; McCarty, 2009; Zorko, 2009), and community-based (Baten, Bouckaert & Kan 2009; Harrison & Thomas, 2009). A related benefit of social networking platform for language learning is the obvious potential it yields for increased student communication and cooperation as well as output in the target language (Baten, Bouckaert & Kan, 2009; Lee, 2009; Peterson, 2006). Some studies have indicated that learners tend to have favourable attitudes towards the pedagogical use of SNSs (Dippold, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Lord, 2008). Besides that, several studies also highlight that networking technologies improve students' interest and enthusiasm in language learning (Liou & Peng, 2009; Kessler, 2009; McCarty, 2009; Pinkman, 2005; Román-Mendoza, 2009). Other benefits include increased awareness of participation in learning and increased cultural knowledge and communication competence of the participants (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Jauregi & Banados, 2008; Lee, 2009).

In addition, Facebook helps to reduce stress and increase satisfaction among students. It allows each student to study at their own pace (Rashid and Rahman, 2014). Furthermore, it is easy to join bulletin board discussion at any time, or visiting classmates and instructors remotely in the chat room (Elola & Oskoz, 2008). The site allows the learner to follow-up online at any time and overcome the limitations of space and time in the educational process.

On the other hand, several researchers reported disadvantages of using Facebook for learning purpose. This is mainly related to users' concerns of their privacy of personal information. Although a lot of information supplied on SNSs is facultative, users are comfortable with exposing a great deal of personal information online. Therefore, one of the main concerns for users who register on these sites is privacy. There are risks involved when people express inappropriate comments on social networking platforms (Butler, 2010), such as bullying (Catanzaro, 2011). Catanzaro reveals escalating problem of bullying among adolescents in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and North America that occurs through social network interchanges, such as texting and Facebook postings.

A recent study by Vural (2015) reveals that there are some other disadvantages of using Facebook, such as distraction, remaining under the influence of the thoughts of others, and misunderstanding of an idea as well as addiction. Similarly, Couros (2008) states that Facebook has increasingly become the subject of horror stories, garnering much negative publicity. A recently renewed wave of fear concerning prevalent online dangers has been catalysed by scandals surrounding various social networking abuses. Holladay (2010) highlights that one-third to one-half of youth are targeted by cyberbullies, which leads to disadvantageous consequences, while Wihbey (2010) puts forth that there are too many unknown consequences and privacy issues involving students interaction on Facebook.

Informal learning often takes place in daily life, and it usually happens in an unplanned or planned manner. The learning goals are determined by the learners themselves depending on their current interests. The existence of networking technology facilitates the informal learning process. However, there are some disadvantages of using networking technology for informal learning, such as online bullying, the disclosure of personal information, access to inappropriate content, addiction and miscommunication.

Conclusion

This review has contributed to our understanding that informal learning of English through Facebook is feasible despite several disadvantages and challenges which may affect the learning process. The features that characterize SNSs provide opportunities for users to engage in meaningful language-based activities, even though their initial intention of joining the site is to socialize. To recap, Facebook can be an efficient platform for informal learning of English for several reasons. First, it encourages collaborative learning by enabling discussion between learners who are geographically distributed. Second, it enables flexible learning which takes place at anytime and anywhere as learners tend to spend most of their time on the site since it is easily accessible through mobile phones and other gadgets. This flexible learning helps to reduce stress and increase satisfaction among students since they can learn at their own pace. Third, Facebook provides the opportunities to develop learners' socio-pragmatic competence and confidence as they use the language authentically in their daily postings on the site.

Despite the affordances of Facebook to engage language learners in informal learning process, the site has its own disadvantages. This is mainly related to the learners' privacy as their personal information and postings on the site can easily leak to reach unintended users. In addition, learners might face the problem of cyber bullying. Research has shown that SNSs users tend to bully other users through their postings. Besides that, learners might be distracted in the

learning process as there are many other postings unrelated to learning on the site. Some users have been reported to be addictive to Facebook that they spend many hours daily on the site to engage in activities unrelated to their educational needs. It is recommended that language learners are made aware of all the advantages and disadvantages of informal learning through networking sites so that they can take appropriate actions to regulate their learning experience.

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