
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS
Digital Information Literacy In Higher Education

*Mohammed First University
Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Oujda, Morocco 2021*

Social Media As a Medium of Instruction in EFL Classrooms

Azize KOUR

*ENSIAS Mohamed V University Rabat, Morocco
E-mail: azize.kour@ensias.um5.ac.ma*

Abstract

Social media have become part and parcel of young Moroccans' daily life. They are used for social and, to a lesser extent, educational purposes. This article investigates the extent to which the use of social media in Moroccan universities can enhance the quality of English learning. The article begins with a literature review on the use of social media in teaching/learning English. It discusses students' attitudinal perspectives vis-à-vis the integration of social media in Moroccan classrooms based on a questionnaire administered in two computer science and engineering institutions of higher education in Rabat, Morocco. The results provide insights into the implications of integrating social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) in teaching English at the tertiary education in Morocco.

Keywords: Social Media ; EFL; ESP; ICT; TEACHING/LEARNING

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1. Introduction

The ubiquitous prevalence of social media networks in our daily lives has become incontestably factual. Their use for pedagogical purposes remains, however, understudied mainly in the Moroccan academic spheres. This article investigates the feasibility of incorporating and using these tools in teaching and learning English in the tertiary levels. Learners' attitudes and perceptions are collected by means of a questionnaire that was administered to one hundred computer Science Engineering students in Rabat Morocco.

These learners expressed their manifest desire to see these tools used in educational contexts and conceded that they would potentially help with learner motivation and engagement.

1.1. Research questions

The prime objective of this study is to disclose Moroccan students' attitudes regarding the use of social media tools especially Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in learning/teaching English at the university level in Morocco. It investigates the possibility of integrating social media tools in the EFL context in the Moroccan universities and attempts to answer one central question: what are students' attitudes with regard to the use of social media in teaching/learning EFL in Morocco?

2. Literature review

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are central to the new millennium so much so that "those countries that harness the power of the new communication and information technologies will be the powerhouses of the twenty first century" (Bates 1995, p. 249). E-learning, for instance, is a technology which facilitates teaching and learning using a computer-based technology. Bernard Luskin, an E-learning pioneer, explains that "'e' stands for exciting, energetic, enthusiastic, emotional, extended" and, for our purposes in this article, educational (cited in Chowdhury and Khatun 2013, p. 132). Indeed, computer-based Instruction has progressed from the use of CD-ROMs to the Internet then to web-based instruction (WWW). The on-line learning environment has diverse advantages namely: teaching/learning is 'one-to-one' (individualized), it allows more equal interactivity. It also boosts learner-centeredness and importantly diversifies the grading system.

ICT tools enhance the act of creativity in learning. Technology has provided the tools and means for learners to be creators of their own products rather than being consumers, which is characteristic of 20th century informal and formal learning. They can practice writing by means of using blogs; they create videos, take and post photos and other forms of digital art, perform and record music, create video games, and learn and share their skills online. Using the Internet as a platform for publication gives students ample opportunities to unprecedentedly interact with wider audiences.

In this highly digital and globalized world, educators are not providers of knowledge anymore. Prior to Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies, students often relied on their

instructors to explain to them and share references on the course content. Now the Internet abundantly provides videos, resources, and research from experts and practitioners who may know more about the content than their teachers do. Now more than ever, the educator's role is reduced to guiding learners and helping them learn, instead of being know-all information providers. Thanks to new communication technologies, three other types of learning environments have emerged: Distance Learning, Online Learning and E-Learning. The difference between them is that online learning connects students through social networks, while E-learning subsumes electronic media used inside and outside class. In this line of thought, teachers and learners of English can entrench their experiences making use of the following five top social networks: 1) TeachingEnglish, 2) Facebook, 3) Wordshake, 4) Ning, and 5) Orkut.

Mutalib et al. emphasize that the “use of social media is on the rise within education, both outside and inside the classroom ... These bringing them a step closer toward becoming more self-directed learners and expand the potential for them to develop the skills they need for creating a personal learning environment (PLE)” (Blaschke 2014, p. 1-2). Indeed, Dabbagh and Kitsantas define PLEs as “a potentially promising pedagogical approach for both integrating formal and informal learning using social media and supporting student self-regulated learning in higher education contexts” (2012, p. 3). They believe that social media “can facilitate the creation of PLEs that help learners aggregate and share the results of learning achievements, participate in collective knowledge generation, and manage their own meaning making.” (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 3)

Social media is a 21st century term used to broadly subsume a plethora of networked applications and/or technologies that focalize the social aspects of the Internet as a platform for communication, collaboration, and creative expression, and is often interchangeable with the terms Web 2.0 and social software (Dabbagh & Reo, 2011a). Examples of social media include experience- and resource-sharing tools such as Delicious, WordPress, Twitter that enables online/social bookmarking, blogging, and microblogging; wiki software, such as PBworks, facilitates the creation of collaborative workspaces; media sharing tools such as Flickr and YouTube that enhance social tagging; social networking sites (SNS) including Facebook and LinkedIn that enable social networking; and web-based (cloud-computing) office tools like Google Apps that enable document and calendar sharing and editing among

other things (Dabbagh & Reo, 2011b; Kitsantas & Dabbagh, 2010; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 3).

According to Moran et al., “the term social media is a hazy one. And no wonder—for the first time, the world faces a medium that is by its very nature noncentralized, meaning that in both form and content, it is user created, user controlled, flexible, democratic, and both very transparent and very not so” (Moran et al. 2011, p. 4). David Mathias endorses the above-stated definitions stating that:

As an academic device, social media improves the chance to learn by enabling learners and instructors to link and communicate in new, interesting ways. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn provide a place where users can dialogue, exchange ideas, and find solutions to problems. These websites are designed to promote cooperation and conversation (Mathias 2018)

Social Media, or Social Networks as they are referred to in the relationship among users, are rapidly developing aspects of digital media. They materialize in different forms to bring people together as communities: Blogs (e.g. WordPress), Social Networks (e.g., Facebook), microblogs (e.g. twitter), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), video podcasts, discussion forums, RSS feeds, and photo sharing (e.g. Flickr) according to GSA's Office of Citizen Services & Innovative Technologies (2012). Social media are hence defined as digital applications that can be divided into two main categories: synchronous and asynchronous communication tools.

Social media, as a matter of fact, facilitate, according to Schmidt (2007), “three social cognitive processes: information management, identity management, and Relationship management” (cited in Dabbagh & Kitsanta, 2011, p.4.) Students and teachers need to be equipped with the so-called digital skills to be able to appropriately use social media for educational purposes because “in order to successfully leverage social media towards the creation of PLEs, students must acquire and apply a set of personal knowledge management (PKM) skills, defined as “the act of managing one's personal knowledge through technologies” (p. 127), ranging from creating, organizing and sharing digital content and information, to higher order or more complex PKM skills such as connectedness, the ability to balance formal and informal contexts, critical ability, and creativity (Cigognini et al., 2011 cited in Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2011, p. 4). Moran et al., in this regard, pertinently ask “Are faculty as knowledgeable about the existence of the various social media sites as the general populace or, for that matter, their students are?” (2011, p. 5).

Mutalib et al argue that “a number of researchers have examined the use of specific social technologies in particular discipline settings in various regions (p. 3). Indeed, the study conducted by Kabilan et al., (2010) has proved that the learning of English on Facebook is feasible. It is because the features that characterize Facebook are able to engage students in meaningful language-based activities, even though their initial intention of joining Facebook is to socialize. If educators or teachers planned it appropriately as part of an educational project, it would be able to facilitate and produce effectual and meaningful learning of English within an online community of English language learners (Moran et al. 2011, p. 5).

The discussion of any potential incorporation of social media tools in education can be ascribed to the coming-of-age university students who “can be described as ‘members of the Internet generation’ or ‘natives of digital era’ globally (Sanchez et al., 2014; Niculovic et al., 2012). These students outnumber and outskill their educators or the so-called ‘digital immigrants’. They were born in the digital age and interacted with digital technology from their early age (Tapscott & Williams, 2008; Thompson (2013).

Social media have dramatically altered the way people communicate and share information in their personal and professional lives. It can be safely argued that most students in any classroom have used or are familiar with sites like Facebook and Twitter. Yet, surprisingly enough, some instructors have felt resistance from students when they try to incorporate common social media tools into the classroom. So many other educators, nevertheless, avoid integrating new technologies into teaching/learning approaches, methods and techniques pretending that new technologies are a distraction or a hazard for students. Yet, when technology is integrated properly and with the intention of tackling specific goals, it increases the potential to help students learn, develop, and grow in individualized ways. It can be used to help address the needs as described by Benjamin Maslow. With the right guidance, digitally-oriented knowledge can help students make sense of the world, excavate hidden talents and achieve better output in learning. But it is incumbent on educators to teach them to do it thoughtfully. Using Social Media in class can be significantly beneficial because first they contextualize the concepts. Second, they help instructors update their courses. Last, they help create a sense of community belonging both inside and outside the classroom.

Research topics on social media are variously broad. Some studies focus on the use of specific media, i.e. Blogger and Facebook to assist in students’ assignments, or Webinar to

discuss and share teaching materials. Other studies put emphasis on the relationship among the users, or Social Network that aids in learning. The British Council, for example, conducted a research project into “how the Internet has affected the preferred learning styles of young people wanting to learn English around the world” (Prensky, 2001, p. 5) The result revealed that 69% of learners said that they found that the Social Network had helped them learn more effectively because of its informality and relaxing atmosphere (Dalton, 2009). Using social networks in class will thus buttress students’ communication skills, and will make their learning more meaningful. Some scholars have suggested that recognizing the need for learners to engage peers in dialogue concerning challenging new concepts and to work in collaboration with colleagues on difficult tasks produces desirable and lasting improvements in understanding (Jonassen et al., (2000); Rouwette et al., (2000); Spector et al., (1999); Wells, (1999). Distributed technologies (e.g., networked learning communities) appropriately support such collaboration.

Integrating Facebook into English language classroom is inextricably linked to connectivist learning theory. Siemen (cited in Berry, 2011) similarly concludes that “How people work and function is altered when new tools are utilized” (p. 49). The definition of connectivism by Siemen means that learning has changed in three ways especially what we learn with, how we learn, and where we learn. The digital learner can learn synchronously and/or asynchronously with other people using digital tools to create the contents they want to learn. Regardless of the fact that Facebook, in the outset, was not aimed at education, but for pleasure and social connection in free time so much so that Facebook policy elucidates that the application is to “create greater understanding and greater power to share and connect” (Facebook). A primordial question comes to the fore in this respect: 1) How can we expect students to optimize the use of Facebook as a learning tool? Especially if we consider the survey of Roblyer et al. (2010) which found that students did not consider Facebook to be a means for education and Chen’s and Bryers’ (2012) claim that “a low percentage of students and instructors use them for educational purposes” (p. 87).

Bosch (2009) claims that possible academic uses of Facebook are underresearched especially that existing literature focuses more on its social uses. Increasingly, though, educators are recognizing the possibilities of tapping into the already popular social networking site to reach students with learning material. As such, the literature is slowly but steadily growing mainly in the US. Some research, for example, has investigated how

students feel about having lecturers on Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006) and how faculty participation affects student–professor relations (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007). Bugeja (2006), however, warns of the dangers of Facebook arguing that it can be both a tool and a distraction in the classroom, and that the solution is not to block content, but to promote students’ ability to discern when and where technology may be appropriate or inappropriate. Students are more engaged with Facebook, and perhaps educators need to investigate ways to make use of an always-already-there popular network. After all, these methods of community building (online social networks) are the ways in which students today are meeting, communicating, and building community (Shier, 2001). Indeed, Facebook can be the application we need to trigger collaborative student-led learning. Especially if we bear in mind that “a Facebook version of the online learning environment Blackboard (similar to Vula in South Africa) was launched, allowing for 95 per cent of Blackboard’s functionality to be moved into Facebook, with a new CourseFeed application providing users with a newsfeed of anything happening in their courses (O’Neill, 2007; Bosch 2009, p. 191).

Introvert and shy students can feel more comfortable to discuss and propound their opinions on Facebook (Barseghian, 2011 cited in Harwood & Blackstone, 2012, p, 1). Interaction through Facebook is not a face-to-face interaction so that students feel less anxious and their affective filter gets low bringing about a relative increase of motivation in language learning (Krashen, 1988 cited in Madrid et al., 1993). David Mathias contends that student motivation can be aroused. He posits that “learners who hardly ever raise a hand in class may feel more comfortable on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. Social media systems enable instructors to identify ‘back channels’ that promote conversation and surface ideas that students are too shy or nervous to speak out in class” (Mathias, 2018).

According to Facebook, groups are “for members of groups to connect, share and even collaborate on a given topic or idea” (Facebook). The main purpose of groups is to help Facebook users discuss any topic. Facebook Groups gives administrators the ability to text members of the group directly. Group chat is considered to be the most important feature of the Facebook Groups’ product. All members of a group have the chance to take part in a single chat window. Documents are archived and can also be reviewed in a later date. Facebook boosts students’ reading and writing skills so much so that they need to read their friends’ posts and then write their own comment or feedback to the post (O’Hanion, 2007). Facebook enhances an integrative approach to teaching/learning of the four language skills.

Like Facebook, Twitter can be used in following, summarizing articles/literature into tweets, collaborative writing , mobile phone novels, correcting tweets, twitter conversations, and class community. The followings are some well-known language learning hashtags: #flteach – Teaching foreign languages, #langchat – Learning and #elt, #eltchat, #ESL, #TESL, #TESOL, #EFL –Learning and teaching English as a second teaching languages, #mfl –Modern foreign languages, or foreign language. Twitter interestingly provides learners with synchronous chat sessions such as #learnchat, Tweetchat (<http://tweetchat.com/>; monitor tweets). It also puts on offer many Language Learning Tools including: Lingo - Language learning tools. Learners have equally the ability to document their learning progress and material using Tweetdoc (<http://www.tweetdoc.org/>), Twapper Keeper (<http://twapperkeeper.com>), the Archivist (<http://archivist.visitmix.com/>) and Keepstream (<http://keepstream.com>)

Notwithstanding the information technology revolution that has occurred lately and the opportunities social media provides for learning languages especially English, “teacher education and classroom teaching approaches and strategies often remain quite traditional” (Albion, 2000 cited in Naidu 2005). Blended learning (also known as Online learning) stands as a transitional alternative that marries the traditional approaches to language learning to the digital ones. Blended learning is often defined as a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path or pace. However, unstructured social contact and communication alone are not enough. Formal mechanisms such as cooperative and collaborative learning practices have to be integrated into the teaching and learning transaction to benefit student learning in any significant way. The formal use of Social Media can be recognized as a combination of online and traditional classroom teaching as proposed by Schmidt and Brown (2004). They believe that such a combination could enhance the teaching and learning environment as well as technology literacy of both students and teachers.

1. Method

This study used a qualitative research design. It relied on analytical descriptive methodology using the questionnaire as a tool to collect data from the respondents.

1.1. Sample / Participants

The 100 respondents who took part in the study are engineering students in two higher education institutions in Rabat Morocco. The choice of these participants is purposefully guided because they were students in my classes.

2.2 Instrument(s)

To achieve the goals of this study, and to answer the question raised at the beginning, the research instrument opted for is the questionnaire. Eleven out of thirteen questions were close-ended when only the last question (13) was open-ended requesting further comments on the various facets of the use of these new technologies in ELF context in Morocco. The Data collected using a questionnaire is quantified and presented in the tables. To check the validity and reliability of the content and format of the research tool, it was distributed to 10 students as an initial sample questionnaire. These students had no direct relation to the main sample of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

More than half (66%) of the respondents were males, while females constituted almost 34%. Most of them (71) studied in the public sector when 28 belonged to the private one. These figures, to my mind, cannot wholly or partly confirm or disconfirm the gender-biased allegation that boys opt for technical subjects more than girls. Moran et al. believe that the gender-based dimension of social media uses is believed to bring little or no differences in the means and ways faculty members use of social media tools. Moran, et al. (2011) similarly argue that

There's one small difference in awareness: males are slightly more likely to be aware of LinkedIn than are females. All other sites show no gender differences in awareness level. Other than those few small variations, however, it is safe to say that faculty have high levels of awareness of social media sites and that awareness is pervasive among all subgroups of faculty (p. 6)

In the same vein, an overwhelming majority insisted on integrating these tools in their learning of English. They, nevertheless, claimed that they sometimes and/or rarely use these in their learning practices. Students' (often called digital natives) overuse of social media does not match with their teachers (digital immigrants) willingness to tap into their students' need of these tools in their day to day learning. The findings further confirm this contention in that, like their students, teachers sometimes resort to these tools in their teaching techniques and

activities. A big number of participants in the study expressed their unconditional readiness to be members in their teachers' Facebook friend list.

Many students among the ones who took part in the study assumed that their use of social media targets primarily the enrichment of their lexical repertoire and pronunciation. The predominant use of YouTube (visual learning style) and Facebook groups to chat with friends and even with native speakers in the same-interest groups (SIGs) goes in line with the prevalence of vocabulary and pronunciation in their daily use of social media. This is to be pitted against teachers' use of these tools in the US in that

Including all levels of use, the greatest number of faculty report using YouTube for professional (nonteaching) use than any other social media site. The pattern of use is different between sites, because, for instance, Facebook is used less frequently than YouTube (45% compared with 58% for YouTube). Over one-quarter of faculty report using blogs, LinkedIn, and wikis. And just over 10% mention Twitter or Flickr. Professional use of SlideShare and Myspace is under 10% (Moran et al., p.9).

Yet, almost half of the respondents affirmed that social media will not foreseeably substitute the traditional practices and strategies in EFL teaching and learning in Morocco (Table 9). Their teachers' unreadiness to use them and even the socio-cultural view of these networks as vain and time consuming stand as stumbling blocks. Yet, the faculty's use of social media in the classroom is becoming a common practice in the US.

Paradoxically, however, half of the target population in this study asserted and assented that the use of social media will enhance the quality of teaching/learning EFL in Moroccan universities. As for the open-ended question on the use of social for educational purposes, a respondent assumed that the use of video games can be educationally rewarding when intentionally and judiciously incorporated in teaching/learning English. Whereas, another participant expressed his/her opposition and firm objection to any attempt at using social media for educational purposes stating: "I'm against social media, I think it provides fake friendship and fake everything. I don't really feel comfortable while using them. Nothing is better than live learning and vivid relationships."

5. Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to explore the doability of integrating Social Media in Learning EFL at the Moroccan university. It has concluded that students express their motivation and willingness to use these digital tools in their learning, and by implication incite teachers to start implementing these tools in their teaching techniques and activities on a daily basis. The merits of these social networks for education are promising and worthwhile. It can be recommended, in the final analysis, that overcoming the challenges to be potentially encountered in the use of social media in learning EFL entails pre-service and inservice experiential and academic training in the content (the what) and the methodology (the how) of using social media tools and digital applications in teaching English. The curricula and syllabi of TEFL should equally be reconsidered and updated. The study is not immune from some limitations. Questionnaires fall short of measuring language learning/teaching attitudes. Attitudes in their confusion with behaviours can also be seen as a shortcoming in this type of research. Not only is it difficult to disengage behaviours from attitudes, it is equally almost impossible to validate and measure attitudes. Representativeness and generalizability are equally at stake regarding the number of respondents. The sampled population can, by no means, represent the geographical and attitudinal diversity.

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AUTHOR BIODATA

Azize Kour is an associate professor at ENSIAS (Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Informatique et d’Analyse des Systèmes) in Rabat. His main interest is Cultural Studies with a special focus on cultural identities. He is an associate member of Research in Applied Linguistics Group affiliated to The Institute of Arabisation for Researches and Studies and a permanent member of the research center of the faculty of letters and humanities in Rabat. He participated in many (inter)national conferences. In parallel to his academic profile, he is an active member of civil society. He was the president and local manager of the Moroccan Association of Teachers of English (MATE) and coordinator of the International Program “Access Morocco” in Salé.