

RELEVANCE OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Web-based social networking tools are growing in leaps and bounds and are also popular among adolescent learners. As a result many educators the world over are considering how these tools can be used to enhance online learning and thereby motivate learners to learn and consequently better students' learning outcomes. This paper investigates the relevance of online social networking media in English as a Second Language in Nigerian Universities. The researcher is the English class teacher, thereby making this study an example of action research. A researcher-designed questionnaire was used to gather data from 200 university undergraduates of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that facebook could serve as an online environment for teaching the two crucial language skills of reading and writing, also be used to enhance confidence in English communication skills. Consequent upon these findings, it is recommended that University undergraduates should use facebook potentials for academic excellence. The implications of the findings were also discussed and recommendations made.

Keywords: Online social networking, Nigerian undergraduates, English as a Second Language

Introduction

The 21st century is marked by an unprecedented transformation in information and communication technologies (ICTs). The world is moving towards information society, an age in which digital practices have become a global culture and those who are not ICTs compliance (which enable online activities) will be left behind and perhaps be terribly marginalised.

ICTs is connected with the storage, retrieval and manipulation of information (Wikibooks). In the context of this paper, ICTs are defined as a

diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store and manage information. These technologies, referred to as new digital technologies, include computers, desktops, notebooks, smartphones, the internet, broadcasting technologies (radio and TV) and telephony (Wikibooks). Computers, and the internet are regarded as powerful enabling tools for educational change and reform, especially when used appropriately. The internet in particular, through the World Wide Web (www) has revolutionised the storage, speed, exchange as well as dissemination of information on practically all subjects of the world (Ishak, 2010). This accessibility of the worldwide web to ordinary users has turned the internet into a mainstream phenomenon – it can be accessed at home, cybercafés, offices, internet kiosks, cafes, and anywhere. People could meet for social, business and even political purposes (Ishak, 2010; Millington and Smith, 2012; and Karjornboon, 2013).

This actually led to the birth of social networking revolution. Social networking site is a platform to build social networks or social relations among people who share interests, activities, backgrounds or real life connections (Wikipedia). The interconnectedness and openness within an online social network enhance participation, interaction, and collaboration and these opportunities largely account for the success of social networking sites (Millington and Smith, 2012; Ishak, 2010; and particularly students.

Social networking sites include the Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Friendster, Badoo, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Scholars such as Verster (2010), Millington and Smith (2012), and Karjornboon (2013), Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) express the opinion that since these web-based sites have these advantages, instructors could use apply their instructions with social networking sites to enhance students learning, performance and strengthen their learning motivation and autonomy. As revealed by Overholser (2010) cited in Adaja and Ayodele (2013), Abubakar (2011), Kajornboon (2013), youths in institutions of higher learning across the globe use social networking sites to promote scholarship. It is believed that social networking sites could be activated and actively used for the promotion, acquisition and distribution of knowledge-based information. With particular reference to the incorporation of social networking sites into teaching and learning of English, scholars such as Kabilan, et al (2010), Wu and Hsu (2011), Millington and Smith (2012), and Kajornborn (2013) have reported that social networking sites, particularly facebook, do have positive outcomes for English language pedagogy.

Facebook

Facebook is an online social network service whose name stems from the colloquial name from the book given to students at the start of the

academic year by some university administrations in the USA to help students to get to know each other (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/facebook>). In Feb. 2004, Mark Zuckerberg a sophomore at Harvard University invented the facebook website to meet his academic and his college need – opened for fellow students. Initially facebook.com was used with “edu” email address by university students – it was used as an educational tool rather than as a social network tool. The website membership was initially limited by the founder to Harvard students but was expanded to other colleges in Boston area, the Ivy League and Stanford University and gradually most universities in Canada, and in the U.S.A. African continent is not left out. There are about 17 million active facebook users in 2011 while the figure has risen to 28 million in 2012 and in Nigeria, active users of internet is estimated to be 48 million as of October, 2014 (Ledgard, 2011 cited in Adaja and Ayodele, 2013; and <http://en.wikipedia.org>). As of June, 2014, facebook has over one trillion active users worldwide (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/facebook>).

Going by this intimidating figures, facebook is undoubtedly the most visited social networking sites in the world. It is used by students primarily for social searching, for emotional support and as a source to find information about one another (Kajornboon, 2013).

However research has revealed that facebook could be used for teaching and learning in diverse ways. It could offer youths who are its avid users new ways to research, create and learn (Verster, 2010 and Kajornboon, 2013). On a general academic plane Verster maintains that a social space created on facebook could be used to send notices, organise classroom events and aggregate learning feeds using facebook built-in array of tools. Also it could be used as an informal classroom to kick- start any formal assignment and discussion.

With particular reference to facebook usage in English language pedagogy, researchers such as Kabilan et al (2010) Wu and Hsu (2011). Simpson (2012) and Kajornboon, (2013) and Online College.org (2011) reveal that facebook can serve as an ideal environment for English language pedagogy and learners’ language learning performance. The unique features such as feed, online games and chat that are on facebook encourage users to interact and engage with anyone from any part of the world in any language they are comfortable with (Kabilan,et al, 2010). Since most of the features are in English, one has to understand English in order to participate in the activities and functions provided by facebook. It is believed that all the aforementioned features indicate that tools and platform such as facebook which enhance communication and human interaction can potentially be harnessed for learning of English language in higher education institutions. In addition to communication and interactivity among humans which is

enabled on facebook, it can potentially be used for research work (Godwin Jones 2008).

Facebook provides opportunities to enhance the development of socio-pragmatic competence in language learners as well as the sense of community in language classrooms. Blattner and Fiori (2009), Millington and Smith (2012), and Kabilan et al, (2010) revealed that facebook can be utilised for authentic language interaction and to increase motivation and improve the performance of English language learners. Millington and Smith submit that motivation and interactivity with native speakers are crucial for second language learning.

It is also revealed that facebook has unique features that offer constructive educational experiences while maintaining privacy and safety (Blattner and Fiori (2009). Wu and Hsu (2011) and Kajornborn (2013). Kabilan et al (2010) conducted a research on facebook usage by students studying English at University of Taiwan. They reported that their participants who formed Community of Interest (CoI) on facebook described their facebook community of interest to be “a pressure free environment for English language learning because it is a virtual community composed of closed group, which opens for limited members and makes them feel less stressful” p6. Thus, learning on facebook among CoI prevents learners from the embarrassment (from peers) occasioned by wrong use of English language in public.

Mills’ (2009) study focuses on the usability of facebook as a valuable environment to experience and engage in learning the French language. Her study reveals among other findings that in facebook environment students’ communication skill was enhanced. They interacted freely and had successful/rewarding discussions in French language. Also, it met the grammatical functional and linguistic objectives of her French Language course. Mills further refills that facebook was culturally relevant to her students. Therefore, using facebook as a tool in French language was more fun to them. This enhanced classroom discussions among the French language learners and as Mills submits such dynamic engagements between learners in facebook motivated her students to use accurate French.

Facebook as a social networking tool is also very suitable for collaborative learning which constructivism theory of learning emphasises. To learn a second language there must be sufficient interaction with the target language community. Therefore participation in an English cultural communication is crucial and facebook as a social networking tool is an environment for this since English is the main medium of expression and interaction. Students find learning exciting when they share, collaborate or work as a team (online college.org 2011). Facebook is an easy access for students to critique, or discuss each others work and assignment, ask and

answer questions, ask their teachers questions and post information for free creating groups – an entire class or smaller study groups which will enable communication, interaction and sharing of information.

Haverback's (2009) study reveals that through group participation in an online learning community on facebook her students were motivated to support one another for their Reading Ed Methods course. They were motivated to be involved in discussions in facebook and they grasped better understanding of the theoretical principles in ensuring effective reading. In addition her students developed better ideas as a group compared to when they read individually – group reading enabled better understanding.

Facebook could also serve as a platform for students to practice writing skill and gradually become better writers (Kabilan et al 2010, Kajorboon 2011). For example, the participants in Kajorboon's (2011) study stated that students can spend their time practicing English freely as they wish, and this can evaluate or grade their work any time. Facebook offers rapid access to send and evaluate essays or speaking files (p. 616). That is a common page or account can be created for teachers and each teacher can access and evaluate students' work. Although the writing done on facebook is quite different from the formal writing done in school for academic purpose, facebook and similar tools such as blogs and online forum can be used effectively by teachers so that students can see writing done in these new media (SNS) as writing for academic purpose (Yancey 2009 cited in Kabilan, et al 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The introduction of social networking sites has brought about a drastic change in the way people socialise, communicate and collaborate. Undoubtedly, the use of these sites is very popular among adolescent learners, particularly university undergraduates. However, some scholars contented that their use has negatively affected students' level of concentration on their academic pursuits and their linguistic competence. It seems many scholars are yet to consider the application of these sites in the teaching/learning processes especially in English language pedagogy. Since these sites are popular among adolescent undergraduates, teachers can bring them into classroom so as to enhance learning outcomes in English as a Second Language instruction. Moreover, bringing social networking sites into the classroom can reinforce the role of ESL teachers to prepare students for the global world. This study therefore focuses on the relevance of social networking sites in ESL instruction with a view to filling the existing gap in research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to find out:

1. the social networking site that Nigerian university undergraduates visit most;
2. if Nigerian university undergraduates use facebook platform for academic purpose; and
3. if they consider facebook as an online environment that can facilitate the learning of English language.

Research Questions

The paper provided answers to the following research questions.

1. Which social networking site do Nigerian university undergraduate visit most?
2. Do they use facebook platform for academic purpose?
3. Do they consider facebook as an online environment that can facilitate the learning of English language?

Methodology

Survey research method was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of undergraduates of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, South-West Nigeria. The purposive sampling technique was used to select Arts Education department of the Faculty of Education. This sampling technique was used for convenience: the researcher have access to the English Education students in the department. The respondents were selected through the simple random sampling technique. A total of 50 respondents were selected per level (that is 100-400 level). Thus, 200 respondents participated in the study. The valid questionnaire retrieved was 184.

The instrument used for the study was a researcher-designed questionnaire which contains items enquiring information on respondents most visited social networking sites.

This contains the list of 10 popular most visited social networking sites and whether or not they use facebook for academic purpose. Also, it contains a construct (an aspect that was measured) on learning English in facebook environment. The construct used a 4-level Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

The validated instruments had reliability co-efficient of 0.885 was used to analyze the three research question. Percentage was used to analyse the the two research questions.

Findings and Discussions

These are presented in the tables while discussions follow each table.

Table 1
The social networks mostly visited by Nigerian university graduates.

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook	114	57
Twitter	18	9
YouTube	12	6
Linkedin	17	8.5
My Space	22	11
Classmates	17	8.5
TOTAL	200	100

The data in table 1 shows that over half of the respondents use facebook more than any other social network. This corroborates the previous studies (e.g. Kajorboon, 2013; and Kabilan, et al., 2010) that facebook is the most visited social network site.

Table 2 Do Nigeria university undergraduates use facebook for academic purpose?

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	68	32
No	126	63
Undecided	06	2
TOTAL	200	97

Table 2 shows that only 32% of the respondents use facebook for academic purpose while 63% do not use it for that purpose and 3% are undecided.

The literature review has revealed that facebook is basically for friendship - social interaction and interactivity. (Kajorboon, 2013; Adaja and Ajewole, 2013; and Millington and Smith, 2012).

Table 3 Students' Perception of Facebook as an online Environment for learning English.

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Facebook can be used to:		
1. practice reading in English	138 (69)	62 (31)
2. practice writing in English	142 (71)	58 (29)
3. enhance students' English communication skills	130 (65)	70 (35)
4. enhance students confidence to read in English	143 (71.5)	57 (28.5)
5. enhance students' confidence in writing English		
6. enhance students' confidence to communicate using English	144 (72)	56 (28)
	139 (69.5)	61 (30.5)

The Table 2 shows that the respondents believe that facebook can be an online environment for learning English – 69% and 71 % of them agreed that facebook could be used to practice reading and writing skills respectively. A total of 65% agreed that facebook could serve as an effective environment for enhancing students’ English communication skills. This finding agrees with Kabilan et al (2010) and Karjornboon (2011) that facebook is a pressure free environment for interaction and learning English - it is a virtual community composed of closed group where learners do not have to worry about making language mistakes (Kabilan et al 2010 and Kajorboon 2011). Interaction with native speaker of English can initiate a “neo-apprenticeship style learning proposed by Vygotsky cited in Kabilan et al (2010).

Table 2 also reveals that the respondents agreed that facebook enhanced their confidence to read and write in English 71.5% and 62% respectively. A total of 69.5% agreed that their participation in facebook online environment enhanced their confidence to communicate in English. This findings agrees with Kabilan et al (2010) and Kajorboon 2013 who reveal that when students read and write in English, which is the medium of communication on facebook, their confidence levels increased and thus their confidence to communicate using English is enhanced.

It is significant to point out that the sole aim of most adolescent learner’s engagement in online community of facebook is to socialize not to learn the English Language. However, the respondents in this study reported that as they exchange messages with friends online they developed confidence in reading, and writing and communicating with their friends on facebook.

This is keeping with view of Lankard (1995) who opines that in incidental learning, the primary intent of the activity is to accomplish the task, not to learn. In other words, the respondents’ main aim is to socialize but in the process they acquire what benefitted their academic pursuits. Thus their online socialization made possible by computer-mediated communication (CMC) boost their confidence to communicate with other users of facebook. As pointed but by Kabilan et al (2010) CMC benefits shy and introverted students, enable then interact more with others and rely less on their MT.

Also Kern (2013) opines that CMC also known as Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC) (also referred to as synchronous or asynchronous) especially the ones categorized as asynchronous modes (e.g. email, forums, wikis, blogs, SMS texting and social networking sites like facebook, MySpace) leave an enduring trace. All forms of EMC allow them to be searched, sorted, reviewed, forwarded and recontextualised. In EMC, information is communicated principally in textual form. This has potential

benefits for language learning in that exchanges can be mined for vocabulary, structures and discourse markers.

Conclusion

The explosive use of the internet via the technology that support facebook and features that characterize it – CMC or EMC, has generated a hot research. Some empirical studies have demonstrated that SNSs do influence student's performance. The current study explores the relevance of online SNS in ESL pedagogy in Nigeria Universities. The findings are in consonance with the studies of Kajorboon (2013), Wu and Hsu (2011), and Kabilan et al, (2010) which reveal that through student's interactions with their friends in the target language, the students are able to learn new words, read and write better English and had their communication skills enhanced. All these previous studies revealed that interpersonal relationship which is an important component of learning may foster the exchange of information and knowledge or may enhance learning motivations.

Although 60% of the respondents in this study indicated that they never used facebook platform for academic purpose, holding casual discussions or engagement in social chats with their facebook friends, facebook enabled them to acquire new vocabulary which improved their reading and writing skills and also built their confidence to communicate in English.

The literature reviewed revealed that facebook is a market place for textbooks. Since there is paucity of academic materials in most Nigeria public universities, undergraduates can expand the facebook platform for the exchange of academic materials. They can use these materials to augment their knowledge – base and therefore be able to compete favourably with their counterparts in the global world.

From the perspective of incidental learning, facebook is a suitable platform to learn English as revealed in this study. The technologies that support facebook and the features that characterize facebook engaged students in meaningful language related activities even though their initial intention of creating an account in facebook is to socialize. The implication is that the technologies and features on facebook could be used by teachers to facilitate and produce effective and meaningful learning of English with online community of English language learners.

However, as Kern (2012) counsels teachers must be wary of co-opting learners' established online practices by pedagogizing them. This is because some richest online learning environment may not at all be pedagogical in purpose.

In conclusion, the accelerating diffusion of digital media and wireless networks together with the increased naturalization of EMC, promises that

technology – supported language learning is a critical area for teaching and research. Teachers cannot shy away from the use of technology but the imperative of teachers is to use technology – mediated tools effectively to facilitate rather than inhibit learning.

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