

**SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: TOOLS THAT ENHANCE
LEARNING ACTIVITIES AMONG THE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS**

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites are increasingly becoming an important tool that enhances the study of English language. Despite its extraordinary growth in the everyday life of user's education, documented evidences have shown various studies on (SNS) as the dominant theme in the academic cycle of researchers, teachers, language educators and students. However, many studies have conducted on the application SNS to enhance the teaching and learning of English language in the classroom context. Such as; WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, www.englishbaby.com, You Tube and Instagram. This study aims to investigate how social media sites can improve research activities and English language skills among Nigerian students studying at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Research participants were 10 postgraduates and undergraduates' students. Data was generated through face-to-face interviews and was transcribed verbatim. The analysis of data was conducted using thematic analysis. The findings showed that five main categories of themes were emerged from the participants views and ideas on the effectiveness and impact of integrating social networking sites for teaching English language. The study also finds that WhatsApp, Face book and You Tube are the most common social media site that they prefer most. Finally, the paper suggested that social networking sites can be incorporated in the syllabus to improve English language teaching and learning.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, Learning activities, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram

1.0 Introduction

More than 100 years ago, the world has witnessed a new scientific and technological advancement that has impacted on political, social, and economical activities of the people living in all part of the world (Mahoney, 1988). This was the advent of information technology that has completely changed the way people think, behave and interact with one another (Massi, Patrón, Verdú, & Scilipoti, 2012). Today, information technology has given birth to a number of social networks that not only offer participants the opportunity to express themselves but to know and interact with each other (McBride, 2009) have identified about 347 social networking sites excluding other noticeable dating websites, and among these websites 15 were identified as the top social networking websites ranked according to its popularity (eBizMBA, 2014) such as Facebook, (Facebook.com), Twitter (twitter.com), LinkedIn (linkedin.com), Pinterest (pinterest.com) and Google Plus+ (plus.google.com) just to mentioned a few.

In addition, many researchers also have identified the significance and benefits of social network sites. For instance (Alnujaidi, 2017; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; McBride, 2009b; Mittal, 2018; Reinhardt, 2011; Saylag, 2013a). Affirmed that the (SNSs) played a vital for the enhancement of students' vocabulary development and learning of English language. Other studies conducted on the advantage and significance of social networking sites which goes in line with previous researchers such as (Alhabash, Chiang, & Huang, 2014; Alias, Manan, Yusof, & Pandian, 2012; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Saylag, 2013). . Therefore, this study aim to compliment the efforts of previous studies by shading more light on the important social networking websites.

2.0 Definition of Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

There are numerous definitions of social networking sites as there are various scholars. Some of these definitions are theoretical, while others are functional definitions.

For example, McBride (2009) defined social-networking sites (SNS) as “websites built to allow people to express themselves and to interact socially with others”. Ellison (2007) defined social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. The terms “social networking sites” and “social network site” has been used to denote different concepts, while other scholars used the concept synonymously (McBride, 2009). However, in this paper the two terms are used interchangeably.

The Application of Connectivism Learning Theory

Connectivism is a conceptual framework which views learning as a network phenomenon influenced by technology and socialization (Siemens, 2006). It is claimed to have roots in principles explored by chaos, network and complexity and self-organisation theories. In addition, Siemens (2005) viewed these existing traditions limited due to their intrapersonal view of learning,

their failure to address the learning that is located within technology and organizations and their lack of contribution to the value judgments that need to be made in knowledge-rich environments.

Research Method

A qualitative research was conducted to achieve the objectives of the study. Bogdan and Bilken (2007) stated that a qualitative research provides a very thorough insight about the feelings and thoughts of participants. The participants of study involving 10 PhD students who were selected from two different institutions from Nigeria, the participants' ages were ranging from 30 to 42 years, their teaching experiences also started from 10-15 years. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed as guided by (Creswell, 2010; Putton, 1990). The analysis involved was a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which allows for thorough analysis in finding coherent and distinctive themes. The coding process was conducted in parallel with the phases of data generation and coded based on the chronology of the phases themselves (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The researcher used pseudonym to explain the participants teaching' experiences. Table 1 displays the profiles of the participants in this study.

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

S/N	Name	Qualification	Teaching experience
1	Nura Baba	M.A History	8 years
2	Abubakar Malami	MSc Public Adm	7 years
3	Hussain Hassan	M.A English	15 years
4	Ishaq Uba Haruna	M.A Islamic studies	5 years
5	Aisha Kabir	MSc engineering	5 years
6	Nabila Ibrahim	MSc Economics	8years
7	Sadiya Aliyu	MSc Mass com	8 years
8	Safiya Musa	MSc Sociology	9 years
9	Abubakar Yakubu	MSc Sociology	12 years
10	Kabir Ibrahim	MSc Public Adm	10 years

Table 2:
Exclusively pedagogical channels

S/N	Learn English	Find friends	English, baby	Find English, baby
1	English lesson	English Chat	About English, baby	facebook.com
2	TOEFL Tips and Tricks	English Forums	Press	instagram.com
3	English Grammar	English blogs	Ebaby blogs	t.sina.com
4	Vocab	Member photos		youtube.com
5	Ebaby TV	Search		Twitter
6	Celebrity English Lesson	6	Celebrity English Lesson	6
7	Teacher Talk	7	Teacher Talk	7
8	Find English Schools			

Source: Hayden (2000).

Table: 3
The World's Most Popular Social Network Sites (eBizMBA, 2016).

SNS	Monthly Visitors	eBizMBA Rank	Compete Rank	Quantcast Rank	Alexa Rank	Total Rank
Facebook	1.100.000.000	3	3	3	2	1
YouTube	1,000,000,000	3	4	2	3	2
Twitter	310,000,000	12	21	8	8	3
LinkedIn	255,000,000	18	25	19	9	4
Pinterest	250,000,000	22	27	13	26	5
Google Plus1	120,000,000	30	32	28	NA	6
Tumblr	110,000,000	34	55	13	34	7
Instagram	100,000,000	77	49	145	36	8
Reddit	85,000,000	85	81	146	30	9
VK	80,000,000	97	150	120	21	10
Flickr	56,000,000	123	138	139	91	11
Vine	42,000,000	581	237	335	1172	12
Meetup	40,000,000	596	791	701	296	13
Ask FM	37,000,000	779	2046	113	179	14
Classmates	15,000,000	1487	153	285	422	15

Source: Alnujaidi, (2017).

3.0 Teaching of English Language & (SNS): A Review of Related Studies

One of the most popular networking sites that have been documented in the literature is the Facebook (Prigg, 2014; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Wikipedia, 2014). It has more than 1.3 billion users nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of the world population. This implies that in every four people, one of them is a user of a Facebook. This unprecedented growth of Facebook, has prompted the attention of numerous researchers from various disciplines (Ellison, 2007; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Pomerantz & Stutzman, 2006; Tufekci, 2008) and its multiplier effect have resulted in a positive relationship among students and teachers of English language. Empirical studies have documented the role of Facebook in facilitating the motivation of users to learn English. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that a lot of literatures have been written on the role of Facebook in the diffusion of English language.

For instance, Blattner and Fiori (2009) studied how Facebook website provide language teachers and learners with opportunities to enhance both aspects by participating and observing in 'groups' discussions from different regions of the world where the target language is spoken natively. In short, their study has added new knowledge on the importance of implementing e-learning tools such as Facebook into English learning classroom.

In addition, it addresses the benefits and opportunities that Facebook has to offer when implemented in an educationally meaningful way.

Another study undertaken by Kabilan et al., (2010) investigated 300 undergraduate students at University Saints Malaysia (USM), Penang as a way of learning environment that could encourage, support and improve learning English language. Finding indicates that teachers and language trainers used Facebook as a tool to improve learning of English language. Facebook therefore could be utilized as an online environment that facilitates the learning of English. Nevertheless, teachers or language trainers have been cautioned to integrate Facebook as an educational project with pre-determined learning objectives and outcomes for the learning experience to be meaningful. It is suggested that future research should focus on the meaningfulness of Facebook to students' language learning experiences.

Hiew (2011). Revealed varying viewpoints such as difficulties and reasons that students faced in learning the four language skills i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing; and the lack of confidence which hampered their language improvement. This research hopes to enlighten educators of arduous challenges that students faced in learning the English language so that they may strive to improve and consolidate their teaching skills, thus, making language teaching and learning more effective and meaningful for both teachers and students. The research examined ways of reducing problems facing the students studying the language skills, reading, writing, and speaking and suggests some methods which encourage the students to understand English and communicate effectively.

Shih (2011). Examined the use of Facebook among 46 student's respondents from public and private colleges who studied English Language. The result shows that using Facebook improves their learning and writing skill through pre-test and post-test peer assessment blended teaching approach.

This blended approach consisted of one-third of a semester of classroom instruction and two-thirds of a semester combining Facebook, peer assessment, and classroom instruction.

The respondents were 23 first-year students majoring in English at a technological university in Taiwan participating in an 18 weeks English writing class. They were divided into three groups with three Facebook platforms. The findings suggest that incorporating peer assessment using Facebook in learning English writing can be interesting and effective for college-level English writing classes. Students can improve their English writing skills and knowledge not only from the in-class instruction but also from cooperative learning. In addition, Facebook integrated instruction can significantly enhance students' interest and motivation. Finally, the findings provide useful instructional strategies for teachers of ESL English writing courses. Similarly, Massi et al., (2012) identified, that Facebook can add another dimension to the traditional English Language teaching experience by contributing to an interactive space that promotes the development of awareness-raising and peer group collaboration. Likewise, the use of Facebook as a tool can affirm learners' identities while creating a sense of belonging and empowerment, as teachers and learners become entrenched on a reciprocal exchange of ideas and with the new challenges of teaching and learning posed by the technological innovations.

In a another study, Alias et al. (2012) investigates forty students (twenty five females and fifteen males), from two intact groups students on the promises of using Facebook Notes as English Language Learning Strategy (LLS) training tool. Findings from quasi-experimental, non-equivalent experimental and control group pre-tests and post-tests indicate that Facebook Notes can be utilized as LLS training tool in line with the current technological trend. Internet-savvy undergraduates in this study were observed to be enthusiastic with the training tool thus, began to use the indirect LLS more in their learning.

The control group which did not go through LLS training hasn't shown much difference in their LLS use before and after going through normal ESL instruction. However, the experimental group proved that they used the LLS more after the training. This finding is consistent with findings documented by earlier researchers such as Raja money (2008). This shows that although both groups use the same categories of strategies, post test results show that the experimental group learners use the strategies more frequently. However, the students' academic writing performance for both groups was more or less the same. Both groups improved in their post-test results, but the improvement demonstrated by the experimental group was not statistically significant.

Alfahadi, (2017) contends that Instagram, you tube, Twitter and Facebook, Smartphone and tablet technology are widely used to helps students to improve social learning both in the school and outside classroom contexts. The study shows that these social network sites are very significant in the transformation of teaching and learning of English language in Tabuk University Saudi Arabian university. The researchers suggested that English language teachers, educators can incorporate these SNS in the curriculum for better learning of their students.

Abraham, Mir, Shuhara and Sato (2018) argue that social networking sites have become useful and popular in modern society across the world. The researchers conducted survey with 88 postgraduate and undergraduates' students using Facebook in Japan. The findings revealed that majority of the students agreed that Facebook offer them a great impact to learn English and to have improve their communication skills and for fostering quality the quality of online English education.

Similarly, Babacan and Gunuc (2017) states that application of social networking sites enhances the students learning and vocabulary development which subtle many challenges in their day to

day social activities among the youth. The study found that ICT usage for foreign language address the difficulties of teaching and learning of basic English language skills such as listening, reading, speaking and writing which played a significant in development of language education sector across the globe. In addition, Chawinga (2017) believes that Twitter and blog online networking's capacity to empower students of department of library and information science at Mzuzu University in Malawi to connection, share, and work together has made its utilization more basic of learning. Data was collected through questionnaire was administered to 64 students and analysis of Twitter and blog posts to find out their perception and personal views in a classroom context.

Faizi (2018) analysed the application of web 2.0 towards the development of student's perceptions and attitudes of learning English language. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of teachers used these webs 2.0 applications to sending learning materials and another personal Internet usage. Tabrizi and Onvani (2018) examines the impact of Telegram as a tool of the social network, on learning L2 vocabulary by Iranian EFL beginners. The researchers employed a quasi-experimental research design was used with total number of thirty-one Iranian students, their age ranging from 10-14 years were selected through the convenience sampling technique to English vocabulary to the students within the period of four weeks. The finding of the study shows that using the SNS encouraged the student learning and mastering vocabulary compared with traditional approach of teaching English language. Ketabi and Kavoshian (2017) examined the usage of mobile social network sites (MSNSs) have increased in recent years on people's daily lives and in different areas of study. The researchers shading more-light to enrich our understanding regarding the implementation of ICT facilities such as MSNSs in second language teacher education (SLTE) in the educational system. It was concluded that the role of mobile social network sites could be of great important in improving the second language teacher education programs of both developing and developed nations around the world.

Khoshsima, Said, and Arbabi (2018) conducted a research investigating the benefit of the online instruction with the use of Telegram, a mobile application which is widely utilized by Iranians. The researchers developed a Telegram with 280 members as learners and 15 members as tutors. A descriptive qualitative method and interviews was used for data collection. The findings show that the teachers see the use of modern technology as a golden opportunity for interaction and collaboration with other teachers for conducting online courses. Litzler (2017) conducted a case study with first-year class students of Business English at Universidad de Alcalá and explore their attitudes using Web 2.0 site and social media for language learning. The data were collected through a focus group and online questionnaire. The result shows that application of web 2.0 has great significance compared to traditional method of teaching of foreign language courses at university, often focusing on the teacher and the syllabus contents.

After marrying up the foregone discussions, one can reasonably conclude that, although social networking sites such as (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Web 2.0 and You Tube) are not originally created to serve English teachers and learners, but an open social networking website that incorporate multidimensional aspects of socialization, has received due consideration from English language researchers. This paper intends to achieve just that as our little contribution. Moreover, the study shows that teachers, language educators and students can correct their mistakes when they are communicating and interacting in the classroom or outside. Finally, the study shows that it permits them to gain more knowledge about English language.

Table 4: Example of (SNS).
 Used for Teaching English Language



Source: Conole & Culver (2009).

4.0 Findings

This research aimed to identify the benefits of (SNSs) use by English language teachers. Based on the analysis done, five main themes were emerged, namely: Enhancing learners’ output, developing cordial relationship, Improvement of learners/teachers reading skills, vocabulary acquisition, confidence and motivation as discussed in the next sections.

Table: 5 Shows five categories of themes emerged from the data.

1	Enhancing of learners output
2	Developing cordial relationship among learners
3	Improving of learners reading skills
4	Vocabulary acquisition
5	Confidence and motivation

There are advantages mentioned during the face to face interviews are offering them to express how social networking sites played a significant role in their academic activities in the campus. perceived progress in vocabulary, and grammatical improvement.

(i) Enhancing of Learners Output

The first advantage highlighted by the participants when using SNSs in writing and sharing information with each other to support learning output activities. Therefore, this theme includes all comments of PhD students. The analysis found that students shared their knowledge with each other when social technologies were used in the library or in postgraduate reading room to enhance their learning output. Therefore, all students are having same opportunity to give responses to their friends' writing. The participants realized their errors which enable them to give some contributions to improve the quality of their writing comments and suggestions in their dissertation and thesis they may give some attentions to those mistakes and making corrections.

“Yes, as a PhD student in my opinion my writing is getting better because of the influence from SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter I can get knowledge from my area of specialization because many scholars uploads their discussions, tips and guidelines I used it to correct my mistakes, so I can be more careful to write my next chapter. So, I really enjoy using modern technologies” (P1 Nura)

Another participant, P2 Abubakar, stated his comments and suggestions similar to by his friend contributing so much to the improvement of his learning activities. According to his opinions, he agreed that his vocabulary understanding is more increasing and better. He further realized that his dissertation writing is getting better which enable him to complete his study on the stipulated time given to me by the employers.

“To me social networking site are very useful because it help to google latest related materials written in my research area public administration “Of course the role of my friends are really important because we have different ability there are colleague who have more vocabularies, there are friends who have good ability in grammar, so when we write and do a mistake, they can give some corrections like grammar that they know or they do not understand it” (P 2 Abubakar)

Almost all participants Nura and Abubakar argued that SNSs used in their research activities and dissertation/thesis writings give them some advantages and contribution to the improvement of their grammatical errors and content development. They also believed that they have different ability in terms of comprehending, grammar or vocabulary and ideas in writing. Through the usage of SNS it really helped them to enhance their learning activities.

(ii) Developing Cordial Relationship Among Learners

The is the second theme emerged from the data. All participants believed that using SNSs encourage them to develop a cordial relationship with both local and other international students during their discussion related to the area of specialization. They show their interest how the modern technologies guide them to share different ideas, views based on their level of understand. The participants felt free to google and search relevant articles, read ask more clarification from their supervisors and friends how to enhance their academic writing. Sometime of the participants, expressed their views of the influence of SNSs which helped the to develop a cordial relationship a month themselves. For instance.

“Social networking serves as a medium for learning academic writing sharing different views and ideas from scholars and tutors who have common interest in areas of specialization. So, using modern technologies help me to link renowned scholars around the globe through research gate and academia I really enjoyed using SNSs which effected my socialization with another academic colleague positively” (P3 Hussain).

In addition, a similar idea on the impact of SNS in which he strengthened his opinion by stating that. He said,

“In my opinion, the use of SNSs is very effective because it can save my time doing my homework. You know, I can do my best to google some relevant journal everywhere and every time. Besides, it is very happy to learn in such a way that is easier to use because we can send our chapter to my supervisors for their suggestions and comments.” (P 4 Ishaq)

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(iii) Improving of Learners Reading Skills

This is the third theme emerged from the data (two out of 10) participants expressed the significant of SNS in their academic work, of the focus group discussion members talked about the improvement of vocabulary used in their writing activities. Through SNSs they are getting more interesting to read.

“As a PhD student I feel reluctant using social networking sites, it enhances my vocabulary knowledge and it enrich my reading skills whenever I am reading e-materials such as articles, e-book, from internet it increases my critical thinking. I really appreciate the influence of technology in this day. my friends’ vocabularies. Another advantage that I think it is important for our English public speaking during discussion with my supervisors as well our academic colleagues at Universiti utara Malaysia” (P 5 Aisha).

Another female participant, P5 Nabila, I am proud of using SNSs because everyone of us studying at university utara with different field of research, I checked related reviewed of previous studies from my area of specialization in Google or other resources to make sure that the sentence structure, flow word construction is corrected before sending it to my supervisors for their comments and suggestions” (P 6 Nabila).

(iv) Vocabulary Acquisition *Grammatical Improvement*

This is the fourth theme expressed by the participants, During the interviews with all participants claimed that English language learning when using SNSs in their writing dissertation and thesis as tools for enhancing their grammatical construction and improvement. They agreed that social networking site played a major role in their academic career.

As a lecturer who has ten years of working experience in my college before I got scholarship to enroll my PhD program here in university utara, to me, social networking is one of the most significant tools that make things easier in terms of my academic activities, such as reading, writing and speaking. Always I am browsing some relevant journals to update literatures to improve the quality of thesis before submitting for my viva voce. I learnt a lot in regards with writing and communication skills. So, SNSs has a great impact as international student outside my country home Nigeria. It is really helpful” (P7 Sadiya).

Another female participant believed that through SNSs, she enjoyed learning more than ever before because she felt that using SNSs is new to her. She emphasized that these days, most of university lecturers, educator and students embrace the use of modern technology including SNSs in language learning and teaching activities. For her, it helps her easily to use her android phone, to google Facebook, web 2.0 and WhatsApp to search English language teachers who are teaching grammar, syntax, phonology, and cultural communication. As a result of that, it can increase the effectiveness of my learning vocabulary and grammar construction.

“During weekend I used my smartphone to search some scholars whose area of specialization focusing on teaching grammar and other language skills which is very important for us as postgraduate international students. It is so much helpful not only learn it in the library but also outside when we have group discussions with our friends. I used to give my suggestions and comments on my friends’ writings. When we found there was wrong sentence structure in terms of grammatical rules, I tried my bests to tell them what to do about the corrections” (P8 Safiya)

(v) **Confidence and Motivation**

Confidence and motivation are among the five themes emerged from the data. All the participants shared their understanding and ideas on the influence of the SNSs to enhance the learning activities.

“Using SNS are very useful to me due to its popularity because it is an open opportunity every user to search different research materials related to his/her area of specialization, for example, after meeting with my supervisor I normally make my corrections she gave me at right time. So, using social networking service helped me to google important journals to read and update my justification and supporting arguments to enhance the quality of my thesis, by doing this it means that we need the internet connection to do it on time confidently” (P 9 Abubakar).

In addition, another participant, Kabir, who shared his idea with Abubakar and viewed the advantage of SNSs during his postgraduate days.

“As a PhD research student, through the use of SNSs I derived so many advantages of modern technologies in this day such as, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical improvement and motivation to my learning abilities, and fostered an interactive session among our colleagues which enable me to learn more and offers me an individualization of learning. It has positive impact on my oral proficiency, greater positive effects and self-confident” (P 10 Kabir).

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of this research show that all participants are familiar with many kinds of social networking services since all of them are free to use. Furthermore, the familiarity of SNSs used by the participants could also help them feel more comfortable and motivated those social networking services are used actively by them. The paper understands that twitter, Facebook, Web 2.0 and English baby serves as a medium of communication between teachers, students and so others. Moreover, the paper accounts on the pedagogical channels that are meant to teach English language. It is increasingly seen as an educational tool due to its beneficial qualities (feedback, interaction, social activity, improving skills, sharing information, assessment, flipped classroom concept) which played a significance role to improve teaching learning process. Finally, this finding shows that those social networking services potentially provide great advantages as a supplemental learning tool for the students in higher education. space and time because they are online tools that generate interaction by allowing new opportunities for more information, interest that have an opportunity to get some corrections and comments, not only from the supervisors but also from their academic colleague as a way to improve their writing skills in terms of grammar, the content of their dissertation and thesis.

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