Social Networks and Language Applications, Other Means of Learning? Students of English at Tlemcen University

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Abstract
In recent times, at the turn of the 21st century, there have been significant developments in the use of technological advances for teaching languages. Following the use of traditional language laboratories, and then the emergence of computer-assisted forms of language teaching, language-oriented social networks such as YouTube and Facebook and other types of language applications have been used for that purpose, particularly in teaching English. Learners’ attitudes are aroused in significantly different ways compared to feelings about traditional forms of language teaching, including learner-centered approaches. One aim of this paper is to elicit learners’ interest in Internet use and to consider the degree to which social media and language applications enhance in-class formal learning. This study brings forth learners’ digital experience in the use of social media and we argue that it will raise awareness as to the importance of these media in improving their language skills. We thus attempt to explore the extent to which language learners benefit from their out-of-class Internet use. A small-scale survey, based on an online questionnaire addressed to Algerian students of English at Tlemcen University, reveals increasing interest in using such applications and social networks outside the class and their positive attitudes towards English in virtual spaces, particularly when having the possibility of discussing with native speakers. The results also show that communicating with others allows them to share intercultural aspects and mutual understanding. Indeed, respondents’ positive attitudes towards mixed-culture conversation are attention-grabbing and significantly encouraging. However, it is believed that such informal, non-systematic methods of teaching/learning a foreign language can only complement formal teaching in class with non-virtual teachers.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Language applications, Social media, Online learning

Introduction

Technologies have long given significant support to the development of language teaching and learning as institutions and educators have acknowledged the positive outputs of using various media in language classes, including language laboratories and tapes, CDs and videos, computers and the Internet, recently. Countless researchers in education and language teaching, particularly those versed in English language teaching, have defended their views on the forms of and approaches to teaching based on various perspectives, including positions of behaviorists, psychologists, nativists and language acquisition scholars. Recent multidisciplinary research, cognition theories and communication studies, have had substantial impact on the development of teaching and led to the switch from teacher-centered methods to learner-centered approaches. The learner is no longer regarded as a passive element receiving information but as actively participating in acquiring knowledge and language practice. Technology-based practices have entered the classroom and the use of the Internet, particularly with Web 2.0 platforms, has become additional means that enhance the learners’ autonomy and collaborative work. This small-scale study tries to question the interest that students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL henceforth) display in using Internet platforms. We attempt to examine the extent to which social media and language applications can improve their skills, on the one hand, and enhance in-class formal learning, on the other. Would it be beneficial to introduce social media use in formal EFL instruction?

This article is structured as follows: considering historical development of EFL teaching/learning and focusing on today’s use of digital learning. The first section considers some background of language teaching in its two approaches, teacher-centered vs. learner-centered. Then, it provides an overview of further developments in technology-mediated teaching/learning since the emergence of digital computing and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as an accessory method of teaching languages, mainly when brought into the English classroom. Next, the paper focuses on students’ informal use of complementary means of learning English through web platforms, social media and language applications. The section is then followed by fieldwork carried out based on a multiple-choice questionnaire addressed to some Algerian students of English at Tlemcen University and a semi-structured interview with some of their teachers. The aim is to check the use of these virtual means and the participants’ attitudes toward learning English outside the classroom context. In so doing, two research questions have been put forward:

1. To what extent do Algerian EFL learners use social media to improve their English?
2. What attitudes do students and their teachers have towards using social media?

- We hypothesize that students use social media believing that these can improve their English, as they have the opportunity to practice skills they are not exposed to in class.
- We assume that both students and teachers have positive attitudes toward the use of social media in EFL learning. However, we believe that these practices can only be supplementary to in-class lectures, though formal instruction could benefit from adequate, controlled use of social media and mobile technology as para-instructional ways of practicing language skills.

The observation and study of the gathered data will help us test these hypotheses.
Literature Review

Language Teaching/Learning

Various methods of teaching foreign languages were used in the past, some enjoying popularity, like the Direct Method in the late 19th C, or the Audio-Lingual Method throughout the 1950s which focused on language structure though it started using visual aids and audio tapes. But these methods failed, mainly because they did not consider the role of context and authentic communication in the language taught. Starting in the 1970s, with the development of linguistic and psychological theories, an approach referred to as CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) emerged. Educational reforms had to continually adapt curricula to scholars’ theorizing on language teaching (Chomsky’s ‘deep structure’, psychologists’ views and sociolinguistic perspectives) and the learners’ needs. Dramatic changes have occurred since Chomsky’s view (1959) that habit formation could not explain language acquisition which, for him, is the result of an innate capacity wired in the child’s brain. The cognitive processes involved in second language learning are similar to first language acquisition in many respects. Therefore, an L2 learner should be seen as an active element in class rather than a passive imitator, though teachers’ role habits die hard!

The emergence of the learner-centered approach to teaching languages is based on the principle that the learner is an active member of the learning environment, while the teacher remains in the background as a passive member, playing though the role of facilitator. Thus, more importance is given to learners for more effective instruction. However, despite all efforts made to adopt such principles, teacher-centered methods have been hard to drop and teachers continue to control the scene, while learners are passive recipients most of the time spent in class. Despite their awareness of the recent learner-based approaches, teachers remain dominant in the classroom as they cannot get rid of traditional teaching habits. Even language laboratories, introduced in the US by the 1950s and generalized in the decades that followed, did not fulfill the purposes meant to be realized. The methods used in the lab were still based on behavioristic views, convincing teachers that repetitions of language forms and exercise drills, in particular, were the best way of teaching a foreign language. But computer-based instruction and online learning enhance learner-centered principles as the learner experiences language activities they construct at their own pace. Most importantly, learners have the opportunity to be exposed to authentic language which allows them to experience some sort of immersion into the language and culture of native speakers.

CALL: Computer Technologies and Language Learning

The use of computers in language teaching began at a slow pace in the 1960s; but soon some programs started integrating computer-based teaching, as in the case of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Defined by Levy (1997) as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in teaching and learning” (p. 1), CALL was first affected by behavioristic views, focussing on repetitive drills, grammar exercises, explanations and translation (Ahmad et al., 1985). With the advent of cognitive orientations and communication theories, in parallel with the decline of behaviorism, CALL shifted its focus on language use and interaction, thus giving learners a better opportunity for autonomy and active work on computers, both individually and in groups. However, by the early 1990s, CALL came under criticism for its lack of social considerations and genuine environments in language teaching. It then took a new perspective that integrates language skills with authentic use in social contexts, on the one hand, and more effective
use of technologies and multimedia, on the other. Warschauer and Healey (1998) write in this respect:

The multimedia networked computer – with a range of informational, communicative, and publishing tools now potentially at the fingertips of every student – provides not only the possibilities for much more integrated uses of technology, but also the imperative for such use, as learning to read, write, and communicate via computer has become an essential feature of modern life in the developed world. (p. 58)

Students of today’s generation have grown up in an environment of computer-based technologies and multimedia Internet resources that allow them to be virtually in touch with others’ languages and cultures, and thus to learn to communicate.

Consequently, CALL devoted its potentialities to the Internet for online teaching and learning, highlighting at the same time the benefits of social interaction and intercultural exchange, including most importantly learners’ interaction with others in authentic contexts, in particular with native speakers of English. Such interactions encompass the four skills, as learners can text messages, voice chat and read files sent to them.

**Web 2.0 for Online Communication**

Eventually, CALL invested itself in the use of web platforms, later on commonly known as ‘social media’ (Reinhardt 2018; Warschauer 1996), to promote novel forms of teaching and learning languages, ways that started fascinating teachers and educators, particularly in EFL learning. Reinhardt (2019) describes the development of web platforms, saying: “Beginning in the mid-2000s, technologies based on Web 2.0 platforms became popularly known as ‘social media’, including blogs, wikis, social networking and a variety of related platforms, services, and media technologies” (p. 1).

While the first generation, referred to as Web 1.0, offered ‘read-only’ stuff through the use of information-oriented search engines and other applications, Web 2.0 offers interactivity and thus allows users not only to connect but also to upload or obtain various types of data. Learners of English, for example, can send their exercises both in the form of text and audio, and even videos, to be checked by their teachers. They can also find ‘friends’, on Facebook for example, with whom they can practice their spoken English. Students now have the possibility for distance learning, particularly on specific platforms like Zoom which offers video-conferencing and recently Microsoft Teams and Moodle platforms, both officially used here in Algeria as online resources since the COVID-19 pandemic. These online platforms have led to a higher degree of digital literacy. The point we would like to make at this level lies in the extent to which Web 2.0 and social networking as a whole can be made to change learning and learning environments if adequately applied in class and outside the classroom. Putting forward an optimistic view on the use of social media, Solomon and Schrum (2007) wrote:

The shift to Web 2.0 tools can have a profound effect on schools and learning, causing a transformation in thinking. This will happen because the tools promote creativity, collaboration, and communication, and they dovetail with learning methods in which these skills play a part.” (p. 21).

They also argued that students can now write directly online in a blog and get immediate feedback from peers and others who could be anywhere. They can collaborate with peers near and far — in a wiki, and also
directly online. They can post photos, videos, podcasts, and other items online. The difference is that they can do the posting. They control the tools of production and publication. (p. 2)

In the meantime, the spread of social networks for communication purposes, the availability of the smartphone and English globalization encourage learners to fully participate in various social media, including Wikis, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc., some of which are of great significance for foreign learners of English. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have led to deeper integration of the Internet into the world of education and language learning, providing teachers and learners alike with the possibility of benefiting from various sources and materials on the one hand and, on the other, from the flexibility of the learning environment, a form referred to as another culture of learning, free from the bounds of traditional classroom situations. As an obvious instance, Algerian students of English here, in this third decade of the 21st century, are daily exposed to the latest information on communication technologies and thus have acquired a higher degree of digital literacy. Owning a mobile phone and a laptop, they have gotten used to the various social media at hand to communicate online with their classmates for feedback and their teachers who can easily send teaching materials. In parallel, they have also discovered the many forms of improving their language skills through social media use and specific language applications, though such practices remain informal ways of additional learning.

Social Media and Language Applications

With borderless Internet possibilities, the advent of more powerful wi-fi connections and the ease of owning a PC or a smartphone, the digital world has become extremely complex. A plethora of websites are used daily by millions of people in the world, Facebook being undoubtedly the most popular social networking site allowing users to connect with online communities and share documents, photos and videos and much more. YouTube and Twitter as well are very popular, though their design and services are different from those of Facebook. But other social media too are gaining ground in popularity; TikTok, for instance, has been a fast-growing social medium since its launch in 2016. Other web-based networks and applications can be mentioned, but here we are only interested in those resources used in education, giving the opportunity to learn languages, particularly English as a global language.

Students of English show strong engagement in using various types of social media and sites where they can express themselves, share ideas and documents, upload and download files and videos and much more, to the extent that some authors have started analyzing such Internet practices and communications from an ethnographic perspective, under labels like ‘virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), ‘digital ethnography’ (Murthy, 2008) or ‘cyberethnography’ (Robinson & Schultz, 2009). One aim behind these digital approaches to Internet communities is to reveal new social values that affect users’ behavior and cultural practices, including addiction to websites and applications, particularly with the advances of mobile technologies that allow people to connect anywhere any time. But language improvement can only arise with a positive attitude toward practicing English on social media and most importantly motivation, particularly in its integrative form which refers to the learner’s openness to another linguistic/cultural group. Such ‘integrative motivation’ (Gardner, 1985) may even lead to the learner’s desire to assimilate into the target language community and their culture. This requires, of course, continual use of authentic materials dealing with the foreign language. Rodgers and Richards (1986) remind us that
authentic materials “will involve different kinds of texts and different media, which the learners can use to develop their competence through a variety of different activities and tasks.” (p. 25).

The issue that we deal with in this article concerns Algerian EFL students’ use of learning materials from various social media that might be useful in their English studies, and to see whether they benefit from these media in a more or less systematized way. In the following, we shall see what language skills can be associated with the social networks and websites available to the students of English.

Facebook, Reading, and Writing

Founded in 2004, Facebook “is now unquestionably the largest social network in the world with over two billion monthly active users and over a billion daily active users”, as revealed by FB 2022 Statistics and Facts. Most students have a Facebook account and thus are always connected either in the groups they have created, like the one for EFL Master 2 students, or with any other ‘friends’, virtually in the whole world. Such contacts allow them at least to practice their reading and writing skills, though the two other language skills are sometimes used through voice chat on Facebook Messenger, but also on TikTok recently.

One question we put forward about Facebook – the most often used social medium – is whether it can be effective in English learning when we know that EFL students are neither oriented nor organized in such informal practices. Rather, they are involved in ‘posts’, ‘feeds’, ‘friends’, ‘walls’, ‘likes and shares’ and information and events that have structurally nothing to do with formal education. However, EFL students can perform their own identity in the target language and even assimilate to other cultural identities, particularly when they become ‘friends’ with native speakers of English. But no focus can be obtained in such a virtual world, except for some reading and writing when done consciously by selecting specific Facebook pages where students can improve these two language skills. Listening comprehension, however, can be practiced through other media such as YouTube and Ted Talks.

YouTube, TED Talks, and Listening Comprehension

YouTube is the second most important search engine after Google. It is a free video-only platform that receives/offers content of virtually all types of interest, including movies, historical or scientific documentaries, education and of course lessons in English for all levels. Thus, provided that EFL students have enough motivation, they can gradually develop their listening skills by being exposed to language that fits their needs in YouTube videos of their choice and interest; this will hopefully enhance their enthusiasm in class. In addition to visiting the platform as consumers of content, EFL students may also upload videos about any topic, which allows them to practice their speaking skills as well, though with no assessing feedback.

Driven by the slogan ‘Ideas worth spreading’, the American-Canadian Ted Talks organization posts videos that cover various types of topics, usually academic, presented by experts in different fields in many languages, but English takes the lion’s share. Just as in YouTube videos, there is no live interaction with the viewers in Ted Talk videos. But EFL learners can reap significant benefits from such videos, in particular in listening and comprehension skills, but also reading as the ‘read transcript’ button allows viewing the whole text.
Podcasts and TikTok

Launched in 2005, podcasting was an innovative mobile technology that uses the Internet to distribute digital materials and allows the possibility of quickly downloading audio and video podcasts, particularly in learning. Integrated into education, podcasting has led to the notion of mobile learning and MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning), a subfield of CALL. Many applications are offered on podcasts, but Algerian EFL teachers and students alike do not seem to be aware of this technological development and its benefits for classroom use, particularly for listening skills. Rüscoff (2009) remarks that podcasting is indeed among those platforms which are “increasingly beginning to enter the standard repertoire of language teaching and learning” (p. 56). We wonder. Will social media be seriously considered for educational use at the university? Or will they infiltrate the formal education setting in force as students are becoming addicted to Web 2.0 and mobile technologies?

In addition to its attractive but very short videos, produced by users and viewed by users, the video-based app TikTok may be used for educational purposes, particularly for teaching languages. Some people in the TikTok community use the platform to teach English casually, with short videos but influential effects on learners as each video concentrates on one point that can refer to one item in a given language skill. Such videos, particularly those made by native speakers, seem to support learners of English worldwide and enhance their pronunciation and comprehension skills.

Method

This small-scale study considers Tlemcen University EFL students’ involvement in, and attitudes towards, the use of social media and language applications to improve their language skills in the target language. The study is based primarily on a quantitative analysis of the data obtained from students at Master and 3rd-year levels from the Department of English. Using their Facebook groups, a closed-ended questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms, which made it easy for respondents to complete the form quickly and with no constraints. The questionnaire also helped us save much time as we collected the data in just a few days. The responses received allowed gathering a significant amount of data to be dealt with from a quantitative perspective, but also reveal some qualitative information on the students’ behavior regarding the use of social media and other web platforms. Some questions were presented in the form of a Likert scale (1932) which allowed measuring the informants’ perception of some issues and elicit their attitudes or perception of social media use for learning English.

On the other hand, a semi-structured interview was administered to teachers to obtain information regarding their perception of, and attitudes towards, students’ use of social media and language applications with the aim of getting better in English language skills. The interview consists of a small number of questions asked to three teachers of the department of English where these students are enrolled. Thus, our investigation is based on a mixed-method approach, considering the collected data on a quantitative-qualitative continuum.

Participants and Instruments

To conduct the study, we thought it would be appropriate to use the web as students today are continually connected, using their smartphones, particularly now that they have become used to online lectures since the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 / 2021). Precisely 109 anonymous
students’ responses to the Google Forms questionnaire were received and three teachers were interviewed.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaire

The data obtained from the online questionnaire reveal the overall interest that EFL students show in using various social media and language applications to improve their English skills. Very few respondents said they did not think these media helped in their studies. Around 85% of the respondents were female students, but gender is not taken into consideration in this study because in our faculty of languages, girls have always outnumbered boys in choosing to study a foreign language while males prefer technical streams like engineering, hard sciences or business studies. As expected, the responses to the first question clearly show that most of the students (66.6%) use social media and language applications to improve their English skills, with an additional 27.3% doing it ‘sometimes’, while only about 6% say ‘not often’.

Figure one below shows the results:

![Figure 1. Social media use and applications for improving English language skills](image)

To know what social websites the students think are more appropriate for learning English, they were asked to classify five commonly used media in order of preference and the following results were obtained:

![Figure 2. Social websites that improve EFL learners](image)
YouTube is the most visited platform for its English, while Ted Talks and TikTok came in second and third positions, respectively. Students can enhance their listening skills and comprehension by using these three web platforms, with Podcasts classified second, while Facebook requires other skills in reading posts and chat writing. The aim of the next question is to elicit students’ association of social networks with the four language skills, and Facebook is classified first for reading and writing while listening and speaking can be improved through the use of Ted Talks and YouTube. Podcasts and TikTok are also associated chiefly with the listening skill, through various degrees of association with the skills can be elicited from the respondents’ answers, as shown in Figure three below:

**Figure 3.** Effectiveness of social media in improving particular English skills

Another question was meant to know the frequency of students’ use of these platforms and a straightforward response shows the dominance of Facebook and YouTube over the other media. But a more interesting question concerns students’ perception of whether these media are sufficient for learning English. The statement is given in a negative form, i.e., ‘not sufficient for EFL’, and right away, around 70% of the respondents express their awareness that these media are not enough, believing that such informal, non-systematic methods of teaching/learning English can only be complementary to EFL formal learning in class, with non-virtual teachers. Consider the bar chart below:

**Figure 4.** Language applications and social media are not sufficient for learning English

In any case, most students disagree that classroom lectures are enough; they strongly believe that social media do help them in getting better in language skills, in particular as they find in these media authentic material of all types, native speakers of English and entertainment.
Another interesting question relates to understanding others’ cultures by using their language. As expected, almost all respondents agreed which shows how aware they are of the tight relationship between language and culture. Getting in touch with native speakers of English, by typing or voice chatting, clearly results in knowing more about their culture and ways of life, something they can hardly get in class with non-native teachers of English.

![Figure 5. Social media, language applications and other’s culture](image)

As for attitudes towards the use of social media, most of the students (93.9%) were positive in their replies; we could not determine the reason why 3% had a negative attitude toward using social networking for EFL, while even teachers approve of such practices.

![Figure 6. Students’ attitudes towards using social media in EFL](image)

**Interview**

The overall feeling that we gain from the interview with the three teachers is one of agreement on the importance, and even necessity, of utilizing various social media for the sake of improving EFL learners’ language skills. Regarding the question of whether students draw significant benefits from social networks and language applications, the teachers’ responses are unanimously positive, and even encouraging. One teacher said, “It is obvious that EFL learners can and do improve their skills provided that they know how to use social media appropriately for that purpose.” Some teachers occasionally use these media as complementary instructional means online and even in class. Thus, positive attitudes towards social media use can be elicited from their replies.
Conclusion

Introducing the Internet and technology-based devices in formal instruction can be regarded as revolutionary in educational settings and pedagogical practices. However, the use of network-based platforms remains almost inexistent here in the Algerian university, except for online lectures during the COVID-19 pandemic and some teacher-student interaction through Facebook or Moodle platforms and Microsoft Teams for the sake of pedagogical information and document uploading for student groups. This study reveals EFL learners’ self-directed, autonomous use of social media, which they believe, almost unanimously, can and do help them in improving their language skills. The findings suggest that appropriate use of these network-based media can serve for implementing supplementary pedagogical practices at an institutional level as they provide authentic materials that will be of great help to EFL learners but also to their teachers. In particular, students can benefit from conversations with native speakers of English, which they can easily incite and thus gain listening and speaking practice, skills that they hardly achieve in classroom settings. The data gathered also show that communicating with the ‘others’ allows Algerian EFL students to share intercultural aspects of life, which eventually leads to mutual understanding.

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