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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON EFL LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF KURDISTAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, there has been rapid developments in English learning at Kurdistan Universities, as part of the mission by the Iraqi government in collaboration with foreign international bodies to lay out enabling infrastructures for English learning. The emergence of social media technology has arrived at a time when learning of English and other subjects alike in various subjects across the world has been integrated to enhance the capacity of learners to grasp course objectives. In this light, this study was designed to establish the influence that various social media tools including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp has had on the ability of Kurdistan university students ESL learners. The researchers selected 90 students from 5 universities in the region, which represented a rich sample of ESL learners in the region. The main tool used to gather information from the research subjects was questionnaires. These were designed to determine which social media tools were used mostly for learning purposes among university students in the region. The questionnaires revealed that most of the students found diverse social media tools to be helpful in their learning of English in various ways as seen in the study below.

Keywords:

Social Media, Social Networks, Facebook, Twitter, English as a Second Language

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, technology has played a significant role in the advancement of teaching strategies. One of the most remarkable technological aspects that have become widely applicable to teaching is social media. Concerning this, although this technology tool was designed for entertainment and communication purposes, social media tools including Facebook, twitter and Instagram have been incorporated in traditional teaching strategies as part of increasing the ability of students to grasp module objectives. Considering that most university students find social media tools interesting, most researchers have supported this strategy as one of the most innovative method of improving the learning outcomes in various courses taught at higher learning institutions. The rationale used to support the use of social media tools, in enhancing student learning is that students, at an age where internet usage is very popular, find this learning platform interesting and convenient to learn various aspects of subjects whose teaching is supplemented by the same. In the case of the subject of this paper, which is the influence of social media in EFL teaching, social media tools such as blogs have been used in enhancing EFL students' English understanding both in and outside school environments.

As it stands, however, the extent of the influence that the use of social media has had in ELF learning has not been succinctly established. Most of the reason why this is the case is because a significant number of researchers have proposed that social media use in EFL learning and any other subject for that matter does not offer essential learning aspects relative to the traditional teacher student face to face teaching. The issue here is that it obvious that heavy reliance on social media as a method of EFL learning does not offer a personal learning experience for students, which is arguably the most fundamental aspect of student learning, especially the diverse challenges foreign English students face. Concerning this, given that foreign English student, especially those attending in international learning institutions share very different native languages. Based on this, research has shown that teacher oriented learning environments are more effective compared to other strategies used in enhancing EFL learning.

Narrowing down to the use of social media tools in enhancing EFL learning, it can be argued that despite the positive influence it has on improving students English proficiency, it also acts as a barrier to learning given that it can be prone to misuse. For example, given that students use the various social media platforms are used

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primarily used for entertainment and informal communications, thereby leaving room for students to divert from using them for learning as intended. Based on this, most observers of effective measures in improving EFL learning have termed the instruments as a negative influence to student learning.

While this can be considered to be widely true, there is still much observations that social media tools can have many positive benefits to ELF students in their journeys to developing proficiency in English language for writing and communication purposes. Most of this is laid on the fundamental fact that as the world changes as it has been with the rapid technological advancements made in recent years to learning and other aspects of social and professional lives, there is a dire need for teachers to follow the trend in making learning adaptable to technological changes. The most compelling argument to support this idea, part of supporting that social media tools have a positive influence of L2 English learning is that the current generation of students was born in an internet age, and as such has become accustomed to using the internet applications in their daily lives. Considering that the internet have proven to be a wide database for most learning materials, it therefore follows that social media platforms can have a positive influence on L2 English learning. It is however paramount to emphasize that this can only be true if teachers assisting L2 English learners to instill discipline in students while using social media sites for English learning purposes. Even more importantly, it is crucial that L2 English students develop an ethical approach while using the internet and specifically social media sites that have been incorporated by their teachers as part of strategies to enhance their English learning. In this way, it will be possible for researchers to definitively establish the influence that social media platforms have on EFL learning.

Background Information

English learning has become an important element modern school curriculums, given that it is the most widely used official language in most parts of the world. apart from this, the need for most students especially those from country's whose education systems are not well developed, learning English has become crucial to their prospects of studying various subjects abroad. With all the challenges of learning English as a second language, the availability of numerous online materials have provided students with an added advantage in their efforts to develop English vocabulary proficiency, not mentioning other elements of English language learning. For example, according to Dhanya (2016), nonnative English learners have had an excellent chance in developing their English skills in and out school environments due to the online learning aids available on the internet. With the advancement of technological aids in learning, online bloggers have placed thousands, if not millions of English aids, including virtual classes where students interested to develop their English grammar, vocabulary, pedagogy, among other English learning aspects can get information and at the same time, share ideas with other foreign students.

Concerning the latter, various higher learning institutions have developed specific subject websites where both learners and students can interact, in various stages of English learning (Rehm & Uszkoreit, 2012). Such platforms have become increasingly effective in learning English as a second language for students from diverse native language backgrounds, mainly due to the fact the sharing ideas offers different students with an opportunity to motivate themselves based on the diverse challenges face in developing knowledge in English language. This is mainly because English like any other is a communication instrument, and by forming virtual communication platforms, it is possible for L2 English learners to enhance their English communication skills, while at the same time learning from teachers and fellow students.

Apart from this students have been encouraged to use social media platform, including blogs and Facebook pages that contain helpful English learning materials and tips, apart from using the teacher centered setting in developing English proficiency (Rehm & Uszkoreit, 2012). As indicated in the introduction, it is however crucial that learners, in using online platforms, and in this case social media tools to enhance their English learning develop, what can be termed as a professional approach, thereby avoiding the negative perspectives associated with internet usage for learning purposes (Mubarak, 2016).

Even with this, is paramount to appreciate that despite the negative influence that social media, as a tool of enhancing English learning can have diverse positive influences on the modern generation of L2 English learners, they been accustomed to using preferred social media platforms for learning and communication. Concerning this, it is estimated that about three billion people use the internet today, and more than 80 % of these people are teenagers and young adults (Rehm & Uszkoreit, 2012). According to Dhanya (2016), the number young of social media users is expected to keep rising as technology spreads to underdeveloped parts of the world, paving way for its integration in learning. Based on this it is crucial to appreciate that the incidence

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of increased social media usage in almost all aspects of young people, who form the majority of L2 English learners, can have a positive influence in their efforts to develop proficiency in English language.

It is this extra dimension that social English learning that have pushed recent researchers to probe into the ways in which social media have and can influence the learning process of English as a foreign language, and this study to be conducted in a bid to determine the extent to which social media have and can influence L2 English learning. In the case of this study, which is an inquiry into how has social media influenced English learning in Kurdistan universities, past empirical studies have revealed that social media platforms have gained increased popularity among students there, like in other parts of the world. It is this established trend of most university students in the Kurdistan using most of their time in school and home environments that prompted an investigation into the influence social media can have on ESL learning.

Purpose of the study

Over the past few years, English learning has become one of the key drivers to the recovery of the country from a series of political and terror wars. The Iraqi government has demonstrated unwavering support to universities in establishing efficient mechanisms to aid Iraqi students learn English for purposes of educational development abroad aspirations that most students have. The government efforts to support English learning at university levels have come at a prime time due to the technological advancements, which have been utilized in other parts of the world in enhancing learning in and off university environments.

Precisely, the incidence of increased social media platforms, which a wide part of Kurd students have taken to using is one of the technological evolution that prompted the researchers in this study to assess the influence of the latter on Kurdistan University students ESL (Monica & Anamaria (2017). Even with the controversies surrounding the use of social media tools in supporting traditional teaching methods, this study will delve in establishing how social media has influenced English as a second language learning in universities located in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The areas of concentration in arriving to the purpose of this study will be how the use of Facebook, English websites and other social media platforms can have influence on L2 English learners in the Kurdistan region. The following research questions were designed to help the researchers in achieving the stated purpose of this research study.

Research questions

1. How has social media tools influenced the ability of Kurdistan University students in developing their understanding of English language?
2. What purposes do Kurd University students use commonly used social media platforms for?
3. Do the positive influences outweigh the negative impacts of using social media tools to enhance ESL learning?

Literature review

Over the past few decades, there have been rapid developments in communication technologies, with social networks and digital platforms taking the majority of the highlight. The increased rate of developing technological platforms of social networking have attracted a large number of people from around the world to transform how they used to communicate and more importantly in the case of this study the way students supplement traditional methods used in learning English as a second language (Monica & Anamaria, 2017). In the case of the development of English learning among university students in the Iraqi region of Kurdistan, social networks cannot be underestimated in their influence in the learning of the language.

Even if little literature exists concerning the use of social networks among university students in their development of English learning, it is still possible to evaluate how the technological innovation has affected the same. This is because, like in any other part of the world, Kurd university students have tapped into social networks, as their primary method of communication in and out of school environments. Apart from this, the same students have taken to using social networks, mainly Facebook and WhatsApp are used in communications between students in Iraqi, friends and family around the country and abroad, which has partly influenced researchers into indulging into studies on how ESL students can take advantage on advantages present on the social networks in developing their English proficiency.

For example, according to Monica & Anamaria (2017), due to the increased popularity of social networks usage among Kurdistan university students, most of them have taken to sharing ideas about English learning and other subjects using Facebook, Twitter and other SSNs depending on regional popularity. As highlighted at various points in this study so far, here remains much to be established about the extent to which various social media tools have influenced English learning among university students in Kurdistan. Even with this, it is still possible

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for this study to evaluate the same using existing data from previous studies conducted in universities in countries in the same continent as Iraq as well as ones located overseas. Besides this, theoretical data can still help reinforce the sparse data regarding the influence of social media on L2 English learning among Kurdistan university students (Mubarak, 2016). As such, the following discussion aims at establishing the existing information concerning the theory connecting social media use and language learning.

Theoretical Connection between Social Media Use and L2 Learning

According to Dhanya (2016), past research has indicated that second language acquisition is highly influenced by the rate of interaction, input and output that learners have in the course of learning a said second language. In this case, social networking sites have provided English learners with an excellent opportunity to interact using the English language learned in class environments, offer input and anticipate output from colleagues. The interaction, contribution and output approach has influenced researchers into thinking that the use of social media among foreign English learners can have several potential benefits to their development of English proficiency (Mubarak, 2016).

The latter continues to argue that the incidence of, in this case, Kurd students travelling abroad in search of English lessons have provided a better platform for Kurd English learners in Iraq with an excellent opportunity to develop their understanding of the language. This is because, social media tools, such as Facebook allows students from the region to share formal and informal ideas with family or friend students in universities abroad. The baseline of this theory is that social networking sites provide a fundamental requirements of development of the understanding and proficiency of English language for communication purposes. Concerning this, according to Dhanya (2016), the incidence of L2 English learners in diverse region, who also happen to know each other has created a positive influence to English language development on both sides (Mubarak, 2016). This is because SSNs have provided students with an excellent platform to utilize English writing skills and vocabulary use while communicating with friends, family, thereby creating a opportunity for students to break the monotony of learning English within the confines of traditional learning methods.

Apart from this, the influence of social media on English learning can be evaluated using the change theory. The change theory is based on the premise that people need are inclined to acclimatizing to changes in their natural and social environments if those changes prove beneficial to their lifestyle. Essentially, the change theory stipulates that various aps needs to be filled as people's lives progress based on emerging needs (Dhanya, 2016). Connecting this with the change that social networking sites have had on how people communicate and get information in the present world, it is clear that the change theory supports that the later can have a positive influence on ELS learning.

In this case, Kurd university students can gain positive benefits from using social media as a platform for sharing ideas in English as learned in classroom settings. (Mubarak, 2016). The change in subject is the technological advancements that have occurred in the field of learning. Specifically, the emergence of the digital media has come at a time when students need more convenient methods of enhancing learning. In this case, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and twitter, been the favorite among Kurd University students have been found to be alliterative methods of using English learned in school environments. As such, the emergence of social media usage have provided these students with a change in the traditional methods that students used in applying English language in the past which were mainly through writing and phone conversations (Rehm & Uszkoreit, 2012). Based on this, it is evident that social media, despite it posing a threat of distraction students from English learning provides a much needed change in the traditional methods students used in equipping themselves with the understanding of English learning. Concerning this, Mubarak (2016), stipulates that English learning like any other subject

Methodology

The research procedures involved the identification of research problems, which comprises asking pertinent questions (i.e., the research questions) to be in line with the objectives of the study. The literature review assist the researcher to clarify the research problems, improve the methodology employed and, contextualized the findings. Research designate strategy employed by the researcher in carrying out the study in a systematic manner as well as aiding in the proper planning of the instrument for data gathering. Analyzing the data involves several procedures that are linked to one another. The data were processed in parallel with the inspection of data, and finally, the findings and discussion are produced.

Data Collection Methods

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One instrument i.e., a questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaire was used in identifying the new role of modern social media in learning English as a second language in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Data Analysis

A quantitative method was used in collecting the data: a questionnaire was administered in order to identify the new role of Modern Social Media in Learning English as a Second language in Saudi. The number of respondents involved in this study was 90, and their identity was kept confidential. Apart from that, the researcher believe that the respondent's' demography and, gender, have no impact on the analysis of this study.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of social media in learning English as a second language in Saudi Arabia. The students who participated in this study showed a positive attitude towards using the social media for the learning of English as a second language. Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have become tremendously popular among Internet users who wish to exchange their thoughts as well as to engage in other online activities. It should be noted that the social media can be accessed easily; they are free and attractive to users and are regarded as the new platform for students of English to express themselves in original ways. Teachers may encourage students to learn using this type of activity. It should be noted that this study provides the crucial finding, which has further proven that social media can assist in learning English as a second language.

A great number of learners agree that social media serves as a beneficial learning platform that may help improve the second language learning as well as adding up the learners' knowledge. However, posited that social media does not offer an appropriate atmosphere for formal language teaching and learning. Thus, a typical classroom atmosphere is still the most desirable for the learning of English language. Moreover, the findings of this study revealed that the learners enjoy using social media since it was stimulating and pleasurable. As a result, social media reinforce motivations, and self-determination in students' learning environment. It is recommended that teachers consider using social media as additional learning tool in a classroom (Allen, 2014). This is because social media can be used as a tool to help learners to learn English. The same view was echoed by Allen (2014), who posits that social media has become a significant part of learners' lives, in which employing the tool in an educational method could advantage students in performing the language outside their classrooms. It is evident that students were positive with the use of various social media tools for language learning and engagement. It should be noted that it is necessary to clarify the aim choosing each social media tool in every activity so that the students were conscious of the educational value of using each tool in order to achieve the learning objectives. The use of social media as a learning tool offers a new awareness to learners which existed .in different forms, including asking questions and the sharing of thoughts. Furthermore, majority of the learners spend a lot time on the social media sites with numerous times in a day. Various explanations were given as to why the students were using social media websites.

The most significant reason given was to communicate with friends and family which is similar to Allen (2014), who stated that the students use social media websites to pass the time, be entertained, and maintain existing relationships with others. It is noteworthy that there are a number of methods in using social media to facilitate learning among students such as, to share, listen and to produce their materials on the Internet. Although this kind of activity seems quite difficult to do due to expenses and technical limitations, the obstacles have slowly been reduced. However, the safety and confidentiality are the most complex part that is necessary when dealing with the social media (Dhanya, 2016).

Therefore, instructors are expected to be well informed in the safety procedures on how to share the data of the students. The use of social media in educational environment showed that most of the students are concerned with having chances to learn and they used the social media as a tool to enhance their language skills. The same view is shared by, who reported that one of the central benefits of using social media is the design of a proper learning atmosphere. Furthermore, the findings of this study show that the learners were docile to the use of social media for language learning. Therefore, the researcher recommends that a combination of multiple social media tools for language learning as well as well-defined activity may heighten the students' knowledge and the learning results. It is worth highlighting that the social media have largely enabled the students to communicate with native speakers of the English language. To conclude, the study also sheds some light on the awareness of the students' technical awareness of using some of the social media tools. None of the students had ever created a blog and most of them had never taken part in an online forum. Nonetheless, these were as not considered as their limitation since they rapidly overcame the complications they had faced (Rehm & Uszkoreit, 2012).

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Most notable of all perhaps is the obvious high frequencies of materials acquisitions (required and no required) through social media (most likely, officially with YouTube or Wikis, and unofficially with Facebook or WhatsApp) in terms of mixed formal and informal learning. Apart from that, the high frequencies of students using social media to share and obtain materials with each other to complete assignments, in addition to the high correlation between them illustrate that students, more or less, were goal-oriented - materials acquisition for assignment purpose. Comparing with the other learning activities, sharing and obtaining materials (i.e. materials exchange) are perhaps, the most consistent students' activities in their learning practice through the means of social media.

Although the department and class teachers have influenced the use of social media in teaching, students' use for their learning would totally be out of their control as seen by the high intention of no required course-related materials acquisition from students via the unofficial channels and the use with their peers. In our case, the department has implemented precautions to prevent plagiarism, including the provision of referencing training to students and the adoption of tools for similarity checking of students' assignments. In the beneficial way, students effectively use their favorite channels for knowledge exchange in order to facilitate a valuable quality of learning. Let us just welcome the new era of learning, as since is one of the most promising method for the young generation of Kurdistan university students to enhance their capacity to grasp the English language.

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