

The Importance of the Social Network sites and Social Media in
Raising the Language Learners' Intercultural Awareness
أهمية مواقع الشبكة الاجتماعية و وسائل الاعلام الاجتماعية في رفع مستوى الوعي بين
الثقافات بين طلاب اللغات

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Abstract:

In the nowadays globalised world and digital era, the explosive use of the Social Media and the Social Network Sites created a virtual world and context where users can exchange different information, share and spread various kinds of knowledge, more importantly, interact and communicate with many individuals from all over the globe. This spread is caused by a variety of interests, practices and technological affordances that these SNSs offer. Learners of languages as any other learners use these SNSs during their learning whether to help them in their studies, to improve their understanding or simply to gain more knowledge. Intercultural awareness is an essential element that the learners must acquire and not ignore to keep that equilibrium between their native culture and the culture of the newly learnt language(s). This paper investigates the usefulness of Social Media and SNSs in learning English as a foreign language and tries to highlight the extent to which it affects the students' intercultural awareness. For the empirical data needed for such a study, the investigation uses a questionnaire randomly administered to a sample of 200 learners of English as a foreign language at Batna-2 University. Results show and ensure that learners used Social Media and Social Networks to develop effectively their intercultural awareness.

الملخص:

ان العالم الحديث عبارة عن عالم رقمي والعولمة. أدى الاستخدام المتزايد لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي ومواقع الشبكات الاجتماعية إلى خلق عالم افتراضي وسياق يمكن فيه للمستخدمين تبادل المعلومات المختلفة , مشاركة ونشر أنواع مختلفة من المعارف والأهم من ذلك التفاعل مع العديد من الأفراد من جميع أنحاء العالم. هذا الانتشار المذهل و السريع يتكون عن طريق مجموعة متنوعة من المصالح والممارسات والتكنولوجيات التي تقدمها هذه الشبكات الاجتماعية. ان طلاب اللغات كما أي طلاب آخرين يستخدمون مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي خلال تعلمهم سواء لمساعدتهم في دراستهم، لتحسين فهمهم أو لمجرد اكتساب المزيد من المعرفة. يعد الوعي بين الثقافات عنصرا أساسيا يجب على المتعلمين اكتسابه وعدم تجاهله للحفاظ على التوازن بين ثقافتهم المحلية وثقافة اللغة (اللغات) المستحدثة حديثا. هذه الورقة تبحث في مدى فائدة وسائل الاعلام و التواصل الاجتماعية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ويحاول تسليط الضوء على المدى الذي يؤثر على الوعي بين الثقافات الطلاب. للاطلاع على البيانات التجريبية اللازمة لمثل هذه الدراسة، يستخدم التحقيق استبيان عشوائيا لعينة من 200 متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة باتنة 2. تظهر النتائج والتأكد من أن الطلاب يستخدمون فعلا وسائل الاعلام الاجتماعية والشبكات التواصل الاجتماعية لتطوير وتحسين الوعي بين الثقافات.

1. Introduction

The Social Networks Sites (SNSs) overspread and attract the attention of many academics and industry researchers due to their affordances, easy reach and integration. This spread obviously infiltrates and impacts the individuals' as well as groups' worlds, their way to perceive and interact with others and offers them a platform for computer-mediated

communication. Researchers who share this opinion like Chen and Zhang (2010) think that both time and space are compressed as a result of the use of new media and globalisation. Consequently, the world became a small interactive village. Recent research in Algeria converge to suggest that learners of the English language, more than other learners, tend to use SNSs and exploit them for educational purposes. Compared to other learners, students of English as a foreign language (EFL) benefit from such devices in improving grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, which, in turn, raise their motivation to learn more. Being equipped enough, these students find it motivating to communicate and interact with native speakers. This virtual travel to the foreign country teaches them a lot about the foreign culture and launches them in the universe of intercultural awareness. There is no doubt that foreign language learners need to know how to interact on equal terms with the native speakers, but at the same time they have to remain aware of their own origins, identities, culture and of how these can be different from those of their interlocutors. As a result, our learners will become intercultural speakers which may facilitate success and development in both educational and personal levels. Although the use of social media and social network sites(SNSs) could influence and help learners of the English language in the acquisition of intercultural awareness, it may also impact them negatively if not properly used. Indeed, this is what motivated us to ask some questions in order to better understand the situation.

2. Literature Review

In order to investigate the impact of social media and Social Network Sites(SNS) on intercultural awareness, we saw it necessary to review the most relevant research done in the same field. Since 2004, the web 2.0 tools come to the fore in the educational technology and CALL fields(O'Reilly,2005). Their use gives individuals and more specifically learners more interconnectedness and interdependence of different cultures of the world. This introduction of that tools encourages any users among them learners, to generate content and share opinions and even experiences. Consequently, this phenomenon created a new and unique environment for both teachers and learners to tap into an authentic environment. Even higher education has been marked by the use of the SNSs as a teaching/ learning tool (Bax 2011, Gouseti 2010, Blankenship 2011). Learners made such use a daily routine through which they communicate at international level. This new generation accommodated itself with the utilisation of these new tools and showed great control as Sablovsciaia (2010) maintained that this generation is excellent in multitasking, they use different SNSs 24/7. This kind of communication allows learners to build, acquire and accept the concept of diversity in opinions and viewpoints at the same time individuals themselves are publishers and critics (Georgetown University, 2010). This might help greatly in the acquisition of the intercultural awareness.

One of the different aims of using social media and SNSs is the need to fulfil the third level of Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs which is the sense of belonging after getting the physical and safety needs. Individuals need to feel that they are significant and particular members of a given group. They use them in order to be accepted to integrate into a group. The users of SNSs, as well as social media, are from different societies and cultures. In order to interact, they need to reach and set a kind of compromise between them. Cultural differences, of course, affect users themselves, their reactions and interactions in various ways. All of Rosen, Stefanone, and Lackaff (2010) believed that these differences in cultures influence communication through SNSs. The importance of the intercultural awareness lies at this level that is to say that users or more precisely learners must keep and preserve their own culture and at the same time accept the new culture. This will ensure not only a kind of equilibrium between cultures but also the acquisition of the intercultural awareness, but also learners' acts and reactions will be planned accordingly.

Many definitions were given to social network sites(SNS). Researchers, such as Pfeil, Arjan and Zaphiris(2009) claim that the SNS is a new mean of communication that uses the computers as a collaborative tool to create groups of communication and expand their scope and influence. According to Boyd and Ellison(2008), the SNS is an online platform in which the individuals who are called users are allowed to create either a public or semipublic profile, and an accurate list of other users often named friends or followers depending on the SNS used.

The importance of the intercultural awareness lies in the fact that cultures in our globalising society are closely intertwined. If our learners are using the SNS to help them in their language learning, they have to adapt and then adjust to the new culture. This adaptation was defined by Gudykunst (2003, p. 244) as a : “dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to an unfamiliar cultural environment, establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment”. In other words, learners are asked to know their culture's weaknesses in addition to strengths, and accept the new cultures with all the differences that may encompass. Before or during the intercultural adaptation, learners may suffer from what is known as the cultural shock. To Kohls (2001) the culture shock is the “psychological disorientation most people experience when they move for an extended period of time into a culture markedly different from their own” (p. 91).

Lysgaard (1955) identified four stages of the intercultural adaptation which are vital in our study of the impact of SNSs on Intercultural Awareness. The four stages were named: honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and biculturalism. During the first stage, learners will experience initial euphoria when travelling to different countries. The crisis stage is the second stage in which learners would have certain feelings of frustration and, maybe, hostility toward the new culture. The following stage is called gradual adjustment and recovery in which frustration diminishes and learners might feel more comfortable with the new culture while the last stage is the biculturalism where learners reach a high level of full adjustment and adaptation. In this regard, Sawyer and Chen(2012) found that the use of SNS has positively impacted intercultural adaptation, they cited:

...as a final note about social media and intercultural adaptation, many interesting points were brought up that should be noted in the study. First, social media has become such an integral part of our lives that the distance among cultures has been decreasing. Because of this process, social media has positively impacted intercultural adaptation.(p.163)

It is clear that the new generation is a digital one which is greatly dependent on the new technologies such as social media and SNSs in their daily life. According to the same writer, this dependency proved its efficiency and appropriateness at the intercultural level. Additionally, we can consider this dependency as one of the pros of the new technologies' use in general.

3. Research Questions:

This article aims at answering the following questions:

- Do EFL learners at Batna-2 University use the Social Media and SNSs in their studies?
- Do the use of Social Media and SNSs help in acquiring the intercultural awareness?
- Could the use of the Social Media and SNSs impact the acquisition of the cross-cultural awareness positively or negatively?

4. The significance of the study:

The importance of this study is to see if EFL learners at Batna-2 University are using the social media as well as the SNSs in their studies mainly to acquire and develop their intercultural awareness. This is why we have thought first of approaching this issue through a description of the actual situation, the results of which might lead us to expand the study in a more experimental investigation.

5. Methodology:

In this study, we will try to see depending on the students' views to what extent the use of SNS in acquiring an Intercultural Awareness can be effective and manageable through the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gained from a small-scale survey.

Population

Our population is all the undergraduate learners of the English language at Batna-2 University, Algeria. We selected the license phase's learners who are all the students in the first, second and third year as they are novice to both British and American culture and civilisation. It is worthy to mention that students are taught the module of Culture and Civilization of Language(CCL) during the two first year. During this period, learners are exposed to first the British then to the American culture and civilization. According to teachers of this module, learners are taught courses that encompasses aspects such as identity, attitudes, behaviors, history, food, symbols, political system, welfare, holidays, special occasion, law, election and international relations and. While in the third year, learners will only have the Civilisation module.

5.1.Sample

Usually, sampling is performed because it is more efficient than testing 100% of a population. Due to their large number (2000 learners), we saw that it was unmanageable to carry out this study with all students. So we decided to took only 10% from all levels of our population (first, second and third year). Table 1 shows the exact number of our population.

Table 1
Representation of the number of population

The level	The whole number	The percentage
First year	796	39.80%
Second year	606	30.30%
Third year	598	29.90%
Total	2000	100%

The selection of sample was based on the random sampling technique to ensure that the adopted technique gives an equal chance for each element of the population to be selected. Brown (2001) maintained that “each individual in the population must have an equal chance of being selected” (p. 72).

Table 01 indicates that the total number of students in the three levels is 2000 students enrolled during the academic year 2016-2017.

5.2. Data Gathering Tool

Due to a large number of our sample that is under investigation, we ought to use a data gathering tool that saves time and effort. We saw that a collective questionnaire is the best way to obtain the needed data. The collective questionnaires will give us the chance to explain the purpose, the significance of our study and answering questions that the participants may ask. We avoided the mailed questionnaire to ensure a very high response rate. According to Ranjit (2011):

One of the best ways of administering a questionnaire is to obtain a captive audience such as students in a classroom, people attending a function, participants in a programme or people assembled in one place. This ensures a very high response rate as you will find few people refuse to participate in your study. Also, as you have personal contact with the study population, you can explain the purpose, relevance and importance of the study and can clarify any questions that respondents may have. The author's advice is that if you have a captive audience for your study, don't miss the opportunity—it is the quickest way of collecting data, ensures a very high response rate and saves you money on postage.(p,147-148)
Hence, our data gathering tool used in this study was the questionnaire for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data.

5.3.The Description of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of 10 items divided into two categories with different but related purposes.

5.4.Results and Analysis

To identify the attitudes, and views of the participants, the data obtained through the survey were collected and analyzed as the following:

The Students' General Information:

The respondents' answer in the first section concerns their age and gender. The results are shown in the table below(table 2).

Table 2

Represent the Students Age

Age	17-26	27-36	37-46	Total	Percentage %
Male	48	32	0	80	40%
Female	87	29	4	120	60 %
Total	135	61	4	200	100%

Table 2 highlights that learners' age is ranged from 17 to 46 years. This reflects a great interest to study the English language by different age categories of people. Additionally, the findings reveal that females have a tendency to learn the English language more than males, 60% of students are females while the males represented only 40%. Furthermore, results pinpoint that the youngest learners form a great portion of our sample were 67.5%.

Section Two: The use of SNSs and Social Media

This section was dedicated to collect data about general information about the use of the internet and the social network sites in education. The collected data can be categorised into two categories: the use of the internet and the use of SNSs in Education.

3. When asked about how many times students use internet in their daily life:

Table 3

Represents the Frequency and the Length of Using the Internet

Responses	Once/day	Twice/day	More	1hour	2 hours	More
Participants	40	30	130	27	39	134
Percentage	20%	15%	65%	13.5	19.5	67%

As shown in Table 3, all learners disclosed that they use the internet daily. We rated that the great portion of learners uses the Internet more than two times per day and for long durations.

4. When asked about which SNS or Social media students use in their studies

Table 4

The Students' Use of the Social Networks Sites and Social Media to help them in their studies

Responses	Participants	Percentage
A- Facebook	184	92%
B- Twitter	160	80%
C- YouTube	193	96.5%
D- LinkedIn	60	30%
E- Google+	80	40%
F- Snapchat	90	45%
G- WhatsApp	123	61.5%
H- Skype	163	81.5%
Viber	180	90%
Flickr	39	19.5%
Instagram	120	60%
Other response	09	4.5%

According to those results, we can notice here that the majority of learners use a combination of multiple SNSs at once in their studies namely YouTube and Facebook.

5. When asked about the reasons behind their use of SNS and social media in education

Table 5

The learners' reasons behind the use of the SNSs and the social media in their studies.

Responses	Participants	Percentage
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<i>To improve my understanding about a particular module.</i>	154	77%
	78	39%
<i>To improve my pronunciation</i>	179	89.5%
<i>To chat with native to improve and enrich my vocabulary</i>	180	90%
To interact with English speaking foreigners or native to improve linguistic knowledge	89	44.5%
To post in English to a social network site(e.g.: Facebook/ twitter/ Instagram...)	178	89%
Interact with English speaking foreigners or natives to exchange cultural knowledge.		

Results represented in table 5 illustrated the learners use of SNSs and social media for various educational reasons. Many of them use the SNSs and social media to fulfill more than one educational need. To them, the combination of more than one educational purpose generate great benefits. Also, they based the main cause of such variation of choices on the reason that this help them to avoid any boredom that could negatively impact their learning process.

Results above confirmed that learners use the internet in their daily life. Additionally, they use the different forms of SNSs in their daily and educational life. Table 3 revealed that the majority of learners use these SNSs more than twice a day for more than two hours. Combined with the results of Table 5, we can conclude that learners use SNSs and social media for different educational purposes. The main purpose behind this use was the interaction with English speaking foreigners or natives to improve linguistic knowledge, to chat with native speakers to improve and enrich their vocabulary, importantly and as it was excepted, to interact with English speaking foreigners or natives to exchange cultural knowledge. We noticed through the data showed by Table 4 that all of YouTube, Facebook and Viber are the most spread and used SNSs among the learners.

II Section Two: the use of SNS to raise the intercultural competence

After giving the students a brief definition of the intercultural awareness, we asked them the following:

- 6.** *Do you believe that the use of SNSs and social media help you in acquiring and developing your intercultural awareness?*
- 7.** *To what extent such use can help you in developing intercultural awareness ?*

Respondents strongly believe that the use of SNS and social media helped them in acquiring and developing their intercultural awareness. They admitted that such use could demonstrate the main differences and similarities between cultures. Also, they denote that the interaction between members in such virtual environment helped them to know better their own Algerian culture, first, in addition to the two new foreign cultures, i.e. American and British. Furthermore, watching videos and pictures might help in forming and establishing different concepts according to different cultural contexts. According to their responses, the use of SNS and Social media help students to keep their own identity and welcome cultural differences. In other words, they understand the concept of "otherness".

- 8.** *Which SNS or Social media is better in developing the intercultural awareness?*

Participants' answers varied and included different SNSs and Social media. This variation can be justified by differences in their learning styles and preferences.

9. *When asked about the components of culture that they try to know more about them through the use of SNS and social media?*

The majority of respondents pinpointed that religions, food, customs and political systems are the most important elements that they try to know about and compare throughout the three cultures: Algerian, British and American. Additionally, they admitted that they created chat groups which compromise natives from the cultures mentioned above and debated basically these elements in addition to others such as rituals, songs and celebrations.

10. *When asked about further suggestions*

Respondents suggested that their teachers of culture should use SNSs and Social media to facilitate the understanding of the courses first, and make students live and notice cultural differences in a somehow more real contexts rather than giving them handouts. Additionally, they proposed that the creation of special communities of practice in which students themselves can help each other to acquire and develop appropriately intercultural differences and assist the novice learners to avoid and overcome cultural shocks at the beginning of their exposure to new cultures, particularly, English and American.

Conclusion

This papers intended to check and examine the usefulness of using social media and SNSs to help the learners of foreign languages to acquire and raise their intercultural awareness.

The analysis of the given questionnaire reveals that students of this millennia in the department of English language at Batna-2 University, Algeria, belong to different age categories and the majority are females. Also, students extensively use the internet in addition to SNS and social media in both their daily and educational lives. The purpose behind such use varies among learners, expanding their cultural knowledge in different cultural contexts was one of those reasons. Students acknowledged the importance of being intercultural aware especially when learning new languages. They posited that intercultural awareness might help them in preserving their own culture and accepting other cultures and consequently, tolerating differences and similarities between cultures. Finally, different activities like watching a video, chatting or commenting have a great attribution in developing learners intercultural awareness.

Recommendation

Students' answers show their considerable readiness and motivation to use SNS and social media to learn and know more about cultures. They are clearly affected by the impacts and metamorphoses generated by many factors importantly golobalization and the use of Information Communication Technologies. We highly recommend using SNSs and social media in and outside the classroom when teaching a new language. The learners' mastery, familiarity and motivation to the use of SNSs and social media to learn can be taken as an advantage to enhance and improve their language learning in general and intercultural awareness in particular. EFL teachers could organise and systemize the use of SNS and Social media through the use of Educational online communities of practice in which they can manipulate and control the content of such materiel.

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