

# **Social Network Sites: Reinventing the English Language Learning Environment**

*by Ellen Yeh and Guofang Wan*

## **Introduction**

Social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and YouTube have attracted millions of users, and become widely used online communication platforms for 21st-century young adults. This study aims to reinvent the English as Second Language (ESL) curriculum and instruction by investigating whether ESL learners consider SNSs as a meaningful learning environment—i.e., whether SNSs have any impact on ESL learners' attitudes, confidences, and motivations toward their learning, whether SNSs expose ESL learners to the culture of the target language, and whether ESL learners recommend integrating SNSs into the English language learning (ELL) curriculum. The study also shares with teachers practical ideas and strategies to integrate SNSs into their curriculum for the benefit of ESL learners and to assist them to develop 21st-century skills through the use of SNSs. The SNSs in the present study include Facebook, YouTube, Google Plus+, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Last FM.

The research questions include:

1. What are ESL university students' general uses of SNSs?
2. How do these students consider SNSs as an online environment that facilitates their ELL?
3. How do SNSs help these students learn the culture of the target language?
4. What is ESL's perception of learning with SNSs in their school curriculum?

## **Theoretical Framework**

A number of studies examining the use of multimedia tools for teaching and learning apply theories of (1) incidental learning (Krashen, 1989), (2) communicative language teaching (CLT) (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), (3) sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and (4) Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence to explain the nature of language acquisition, and discuss how ESL learners develop 21st-century skills through the use of SNSs.

First, incidental learning in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) provides learners with opportunities for learning by doing and learning through networking. Second, activities in CLT that involve learners participating in SNSs activities (i.e., online discussion forums) may provide learners with opportunities to acquire communicative skills and thus turn them into active agents in the interactive world of digital pedagogy. Third, according to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory, activities on SNSs afford numerous opportunities for community building for ESL learners. Finally, the present research strives to reveal how SNSs help the ESL students learn the culture of the target language. Therefore, the present study applies Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence and introduces five objectives: (1) knowledge of the cultures of self and the target language; (2) attitudes of openness and curiosity; (3) skills of interpreting and relating; (4) skills of discovery and interaction; and (5) critical cultural awareness.

## **Research Design**

Two hundred and three ESL learners from three universities in Midwest states responded to our survey. With the Likert scale questions, the questionnaire: (1) solicits demographic information and language usage; (2) inquires about participants' uses of SNSs, and their learning of English in SNSs environments; and (3) collects qualitative information such as examples and reasons for their answers. The data for the first two sections were analyzed and interpreted with

descriptive statistic measures, while the open-ended responses were categorized into emerging themes and analyzed using situation and activity coding.

## Results

The majority of the participants (79%) log in to their SNSs at least once a day, with Facebook (67%) being the most frequently used SNS, followed by YouTube (59%). For information regarding their language uses on SNSs, see Table 1.

Table 1. *Language Used for SNSs Learning Environment*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Not at All</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Frequently</b>	<b>Always</b>
	(1)%	(2)%	(3)%	(4)%	(5)%
Native language only	4.4	8.4	35.5	36.5	15.3
English only	6.4	21.7	45.3	17.2	9.4
A mix of English and native language	7.9	12.3	39.9	25.1	14.8

The findings indicated that participants agree SNSs can be a helpful learning environment to facilitate ELL. They agree that the use of SNSs would enhance their language skills (86.08%), help them become more confident in ELL (86.1%), enhance their motivation to practice English (88.33%), and give them a more positive attitude toward ELL (96.63%) (see Table 2). The findings also indicated that Facebook and YouTube helped the students improve their English skills the most (see Table 3).

Table 2. *Students' Perspectives of SNSs as an Online English Language Learning Environment*

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	(1)%	(2)%	(3)%	(4)%	(5)%
Overall proficiency in English has increased	0	15.3	33.5	48.3	3.0
Use English more often in daily life	2.0	13.8	29.1	44.3	10.8
Learn more English words	1.0	2.5	16.7	66	13.8
English pronunciation has improved	6.4	14.8	31	37.4	10.3
More confidence in English writing	1.0	18.7	30	41.4	8.9
More confidence in English reading	1.5	10.8	28.6	51.2	7.9
More confidence in English speaking	2.0	14.8	32	39.9	11.3
More confidence in English listening	4.4	11.3	29.6	43.3	11.3
More motivation in English writing	1.5	12.3	30	51.2	4.9
More motivation in English reading	1.0	7.9	26.6	58.6	5.9
More motivation to learn new words	.5	5.9	21.7	61.6	10.3
More motivation in real-world communication	1.0	10.8	26.1	49.3	12.8
More motivation to practice English pronunciation	2.0	16.7	29.7	42.4	9.9
More motivation to communication English on SNSs	.5	8.4	28.6	52.7	9.9
Not worried about making English mistakes	3.5	19.7	30.5	37.4	8.9
Makes learning English more authentic	.5	9.4	37.9	45.8	6.4
Makes learning English easier	1.0	10.3	31	49.3	8.4
Makes learning English more interesting and enjoyable	1.0	3.4	24.1	56.2	15.3
Tolerates language mistakes	2.0	6.4	38.9	45.3	7.4

Table 3. *Students' Perspectives of SNSs That Help Improve English Language Skills*

English Language Skills	Facebook	YouTube	Google Plus+	Twitter	My Space	Linked-In	Last FM	Other
SNSs that help writing in English the most	77.3%	60.6%	37.9%	31.5%	8.9%	8.9%	2.5%	21.1%
SNSs that help reading in English the most	79.8%	57.1%	37.4%	34%	10.3%	9.4%	2.0%	16.3%
SNSs that help oral communication in English the most	74.4%	59.6%	30.5%	34.5%	6.4%	4.9%	4.4%	17.7%
SNSs that help improve pronunciation in English the most	52.7%	77.3%	25.6%	23.6%	7.4%	4.9%	11.3%	18.2%

Findings revealed that SNSs help participants learn the culture of the target language in terms of (1) linguistic aspect (i.e., slang); (2) customs aspect (i.e., lifestyle); (3) and sociocultural aspect (i.e., collaboration). The findings revealed that SNSs helped students learn the culture of the target language, and students' intercultural competence can be exhibited through the use of SNSs. The following are examples of students' perspectives:

- "I saw some comment on their photos and status on Facebook, and then I know what is their opinion and attitude toward a specific issue. Then at the time we are talking, I will be able to share the differences, and accept the culture."
- "From Facebook, I can learn some knowledge about American festival, like Halloween."

The findings also revealed that SNSs helped students learn the target language through the use of SNSs in the academic settings and social life. The following are examples of students' perspectives:

- “I have learned a lot from YouTube. Not only English but also general knowledge. Learning from visual media is better and more interesting than textbooks.”
- “I think it can help me to learn more new words, and correct my pronunciation. I might consider using them in the classroom.”

This study has shown that SNSs can create a positive learning environment that engages learners in authentic, meaningful language-based tasks and enables them to learn at their own pace within a familiar 21st-century environment. If integrated into ESL curriculum, SNSs may create an effective learning community that fosters meaningful ELL. Among the many strategies recommended to teachers are to: (1) create class SNSs communities (e.g., Facebook or Google+ groups) for ESL learners to interact with native English speakers; (2) assign bilingual or cultural projects for ESL and native English speakers to work together; (3) create a platform for critical reflection and interactional feedback that values the process of learning and negotiating as well as the product (e.g., Facebook news feed or comments); and (4) use peer assessment to constructing meaningful knowledge through collaborative learning.

## References

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