The Effects of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) on English Language Learning in Universities of China

Yifan Bai[1, a]

[1]Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton, Victoria. 3800, Australia

[a]floriabai1996@qq.com

Abstract

With the extensive use of network, social networking sites (SNSs) has been adopted in education, especially in language teaching and learning, in recent years. SNSs such as WeChat and Facebook are applied to English education in regions of China. There has been a heat debate on whether SNSs facilitate students' language learning. Therefore, in this paper, the author argues that utilizing SNSs positively affects Chinese university students' English language learning. This paper illustrates that SNSs offer students considerable learning resources, improve students' academic performance as well as establish an environment for communication and interaction with teachers and peers. Meanwhile, some factors that might negatively influence the effectiveness of learning English through SNSs are included in this essay as well.

Keywords

Social networking sites (SNSs); Language learning; Academic performance.

1. Introduction

With the promotion of technology, the application of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and WeChat have been penetrated within the society and common people's lives (Won & Kim, 2018). In 2019, the total amount of SNSs users in China is

819.9 million with an increase of 5.6% compared with that of 2018. In China, adopting

SNSs in learning process is not novel. For example, with 654.1 million users in 2019, WeChat hold the lead among SNSs in China (Cheung, 2019). WeChat is characterized for its interactivity and instant communication which appeal teachers and learners to pay attention to its educational value (Wang, 2017). Meanwhile, Facebook is also a representative of SNSs utilized for learning in Special Administrative Regions of China such as Macau. In Kio (2016)'s study, with shared learning content and peer comment, Facebook group has been developed as a learning community which demonstrates positive impacts on students' academic performance in Macau.

As a young generation, university students are the forefront of the progress of society due to their curiosity and acceptability of social networking. Previous study describes that Chinese colleges have adopted SNSs as new teaching strategy in today's network environment (Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Compared with the traditional foreign language educating pattern which lacks plentiful and direct language knowledge and restrict students in classrooms (Sun et al., 2015), learning through SNSs provide with self-control learning mode and abundant English learning content, such as articles and vocabulary. To better understand the effectiveness of using SNSs as a part of English learning, it is essential to research their influence on university students' English learning.

Therefore, I raised my investigation question: How do SNSs affect English language learning in universities of China? Admittedly, there are negative impacts of SNSs on learning. For instance,

much time spent on social networking sites causes students bad health impact, and sense of isolation (Abu-Shanab & Al-Tarawneh,2015).

However, this might be avoided by controlling the time spent on social networking sites.

In this article, I would like to argue that using SNSs positively influences Chinese university students' English learning. In general, three arguments are classified from different angles, namely objective condition, academic function and interpersonal aspect. The following paragraphs will illustrate that SNSs offer students adequate learning content, facilitate their academic performance as well as build an environment for communicating and interacting with others.

This essay is composed of three main parts. To begin with, the introduction demonstrates overall information of researching background, researching question, thesis statement, and overview of the arguments. Then, the body part which is also the essential part of this article will provide major arguments and discussion. Eventually, this article will conclude by outlining the effects of SNSs on English learning in Chinese universities and the implications of this research.

2. The Effects of Snss on English Language Learning in Chinese Universities

2.1. SNSs Provide Students with Abundant Resources of English Learning

To start with, students can have good use of the learning content in various forms via SNSs. For example, online lessons, presentations, articles, pictures, videos as well as quizzes are available for students to acquire new knowledge and check their learning outcomes (Pimmer, Christoph, Linxen, Sebastian & Gröhbiel, 2012; AbuSa'aleek, 2015; Wang, 2017; Lei, 2018). AbuSa'aleek (2015) also claims that SNSs include groups designed for learning English which offer the group members updated details of grammar, vocabulary, and relevant information. Meanwhile, the research illustrates that second language learners tend to utilize Facebook to attain and share pictures, lessons, books, announcements and group activities. For instance, in Lei (2018)'s research, students are given with words selected from College English Test band 4 (CET4), a standardized exam for testing Chinese college students' English ability (Gu, 2018), and uploaded by their teachers in the WeChat learning group. With those new vocabulary items and teachers' explanation, students prepare and remember the content on their own to finish online tasks and random group discussion as required by the teachers. As time passes by, students gradually form a habit of using the learning content on WeChat and expand their vocabulary. Therefore, SNSs build a learning environment where students can engage in the language-based learning activities as well as adopt the learning materials for both self-study and teamwork.

In addition, SNSs contains plentiful learning resources which stimulate students' self-oriented study. Since there are large amount of learning materials accessible on SNSs, students might have the opportunities to choose what to learn and how to learn according their interest. The study of Won and Kim (2018) shows that one of the virtues of SNSs is that students can study whatever and no matter how much they want. For example, students can download the English learning materials presented on SNSs on their smart phone. They could listen to, read and learning them whenever and wherever they would like to. For instance, they are able to listen to English news on their way to classrooms and recite words on buses (Lei, 2018). Both the learning procedure and content are in the control of students themselves. Thus, they would gain more freedom to decide their learning process when they adopt SNSs as a learning approach.

Furthermore, SNSs are obsessed with information and entertaining functions which widen students' vision and create a pleasant learning process (Wang, 2017). The learning contents are available constantly to attract learners' attention and learning motivation. For example, in

Wang (2017)'s research, moment sharing and "shake-shake" in WeChat have been found as new ways of learning English pronunciation allowing students' interesting interacting due to the pictures and audios along with the functions. As a result, students are able to understand other's opinion or absorb more knowledge from what others share on SNSs. Meanwhile, pictures and audios make learning more vivid and attractive so that students might be delighted during the learning process. However, too much learning materials and functions might cause students difficult to choose which to learn or even divert their attention from primary learning intention (Wang, 2017). If students' attention is distracted and occupied by other things on SNSs, the effectiveness of learning would be negatively affected. Thus, in order to keep students learning via SNSs in an effective mode, it is worthy of consideration and further research for educators to give students suggestions on applying SNSs in English learning reasonably.

To sum up, SNSs learning mode furnishes students with adequate learning resources which contribute to promote English learners' knowledge, evoke their selfinterest study, broaden their horizon and enhance interestingness. With the source of knowledge guaranteed and students' interests inspired, students would work on English learning effectively with considerable outcomes.

2.2.   SNSs Promotes Students' Academic Performance

The second impact of utilizing SNSs for learning English is promoting students' academic performance. Students' English skill can be facilitated from diverse aspects, such as quantity of vocabulary, pronunciation, and English expression. To begin with, students can accumulate vocabulary with the help of SNSs. Study illustrates that learners who engage in the vocabulary practicing activities via WeChat promote their vocabulary effectively (Lei, 2018). In the research, 30 university freshmen who have to pass CET4 take English lessons two times a week for four semesters applying WeChat for learning vocabulary. All learners in this research get 20 new vocabularies from their teachers in WeChat group every two days and prepare them for randomly holding discussion. After being taught how to spell, pronounce, and utilize the words by teachers through WeChat, students can do translating as well as sentence-making practices by using the vocabularies. As a consequence, most participants of this study claim that this vocabulary learning approach engage them in the online activities and enrich the amount of vocabulary they master laying a foundation for passing the exam.

Besides, SNSs can be useful for students to pronounce English letters, words, and sentences. With pre-class, during-class, and after-class materials and interaction through SNSs, students would be clear about the manner of articulation, rules of pronunciation, and strengthen the memory of the pronunciation. For example, in Wang (2017)'s research students receive recordings of how teacher pronounces the vocabularies and sentences for preparation before class. Since the video can be played for unlimited times and allow students to follow the voice and repeat, students would have a primary impression of those words before they learn them in detail during class in this way. When it comes to the online courses via WeChat video chats, teachers provide students with clear images of the shape of mouth when pronouncing the words. During the lessons, explaining the pronunciation rules carefully contributes to students' learning efficiency and accuracy of pronunciation. Meanwhile, by solving students' problems instantly vis WeChat video chats, teachers help to reduce students' confusion during classes. After class, students are required to post their homework of word pronunciation in WeChat group and give peer feedback to classmates. The process of finishing the homework and checking others' work might enhance students' memory of word pronouncing as well as the rules, because they need to consider how to pronounce accurately themselves and whether their peers perform correctly as well. After the whole procedure of learning English pronunciation through SNSs, students would have a deep impression of the pronunciation of

the words and principles because students have practice them for several times by previewing, learning during class and reviewing after courses.

Moreover, the application of SNSs in learning speaking English improves students' oral English and inspires their interest in expressing themselves in English. For example, Sun et al. (2017)'s study illustrates that utilizing SNSs to practice speaking English improves students' spoken English from the aspects of accuracy and eagerness of expression. The surveyed students in the research described that they had got opportunities to be heard when studying oral English via SNSs since their oral assignments were posted and could be download by teachers to listen to. After being heard, students would be given with specific feedback or suggestions from their teachers which might help to speak English more exactly. Moreover, students indicated that SNSs provided them with more chances to practice speaking English. On the one hand, to prepare and accomplish their oral homework, students need to practice reading the content for several times. On the other hand, students could upload and update their homework for many times if they made mistakes. Therefore, with occasions to constantly practice speaking English to better status and carefree learning procedure, students would get improvement in oral English and develop interest in participating in the online activities to practice speaking and express themselves in English (Sun et al.,

2017; Wang, 2017). In summary, assisted by SNSs, students make progress in enriching English vocabularies as well as speaking performance and willingness of English speaking. As time passes by, students' English ability would gradually increase.

However, one of the limitations of learning English through SNSs is that it is difficult for students to keep a fixed routine of using SNSs for learning when they are busy with their school learning (Sung & Poole, 2017). If students can't study via SNSs regularly, the benefits stated above might be less obvious. As a consequence, to maximize and maintain the effectiveness of learning on SNSs, it is it's necessary to research about the strategies of keeping a regular and stable schedule of adopting SNSs for learning.

2.3. SNSs Build An Effective Environment for Learners' Communication and Social Interaction

The third positive influence of SNSs is offering students opportunities to communicate with their teachers and fellow students on SNSs. SNSs allow students to participate in discussion, teamwork, and peer-review with partners not only in online classes but also after courses, which benefits learners to work and interact with others (AbuSa'aleek, 2015; Sun et al., 2017). For instance, Wang (2017) demonstrates that students can choose partners, interact with each other and work out the assignments given by teachers through WeChat. Teachers would assign group tasks such as vocabulary discrimination games in WeChat group, which require students to finish the activities with mutual effort. By using this pair reviewing mode, students gain more chances to exchange ideas and figure out the tasks with their partners.

Furthermore, students are able to attain synchronous or asynchronous feedback and interaction with others (Shao, 2011; AbuSa'aleek, 2015; Kio, 2015). As for synchronous feedback, teachers would respond to students' mistakes and answer their questions in video chats or WeChat groups in order that the students could get instant replies through online interaction. In SNSs learning groups, questions of English language learning are addressed by teachers and group members together, which makes contribution to develop a mutual assisting atmosphere (Wang, 2017). Therefore, students not only communicate with others, but also do favor for each other's learning through SNSs. When it comes to asynchronous interaction, students are requested to post homework in SNSs group and comment on their peers' work (Sun et al., 2017; Wang, 2017). Both types of feedback and interaction provided by SNSs permit students to share their understanding and confusion about English learning as well as receive others' perspectives and assistance.

In addition, SNSs benefit learners to establish social connections with others.

SNSs contribute to produce an online community, in which students can keep communication with others. In this community, learners can make friends with other SNSs users. For example, when students seek for partners to finish group activities, they might find friends who share similar interest with likely English levels, making the learning procedure more interesting and attract students' motivation of learning (Sung & Poole, 2017, Wang 2017). Thus, SNSs generate an environment for students to develop friendship with other online participants resulting in more fun and enthusiasm towards English learning.

The limitation of this aspect is that the shortage of vocabulary in English might cause students problems in communicating with others in English (Sung & Poole, 2017). Students who are not good at the usage of English words and sentences might have trouble in communicating fluently and express themselves smoothly with their friends online. However, this problem can be addressed by learning vocabulary on SNSs, which is indicated in the second argument. As a consequence, students could interact with partners and teachers with ease on social networking sites. To conclude, containing immediate and non-synchronous interaction, SNSs is conducive to the development of students' communication and social relationship with their teachers and fellow students during the learning process.

2.4. The Negative Impacts of Snss on Students Learning and Health

Acknowledged, SNSs might negatively influence students' study achievement and health to some extent. For example, Abu-Shanab and Al-Tarawneh (2015) reveal that much time spent on Facebook causes students negative influences such as low academic performance and bad health impact. Students' behavior and learning attendance are closely supervised and controlled by teachers in school or real classrooms, while they are with more freedom and less supervision when they study online. Students might be lazy with learning and distracted by some functions of SNSs such as chatting and games. Therefore, students may partially ignore their duties of learning and present lower grades.

Moreover, spending long time on mobile devices or computers might cause health problems such as impaired vision. Additionally, students would feel a sense of isolation due to learning through SNSs (Abu-Shanab & Al-Tarawneh, 2015). Since students do not experience face-to-face interaction with their teachers and peers, they might feel lonely to some degree because of a lack of companion. Therefore, both physical and psychological situation would be impacted negatively by adopting SNSs as a learning method.

As a consequence, in order to make good use of SNSs in the domain of education and avoid the negative effects, further studies should be conducted to probe the strategies of supervising students on SNSs for better academic outcomes and guarantee students' fitness. Meanwhile, the time spent on SNSs should be controlled to prevent negative influences on student's health.

3. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that adopting SNSs positively affects university students' English learning process in China. Generally, there are three main positive effects of SNSs on Chinese college students' English learning. First, SNSs furnish students with sufficient learning resources, such as text, voice recordings, videos and so on. The various learning contents on SNSs are beneficial to students by inspiring self-interest study, broadening students' sight as well as enhancing interestingness of learning. Second, students' English skills are advanced by SNSs in the way of enlarging vocabulary, improving spoken English and encouraging expression in English. Third,

SNSs accelerate communication and social relation among students and teachers. Students could keep in touch with teachers and partners through in-class activity, teamwork, and peer

comment on SNSs. Meanwhile, they would develop friendship with the SNSs users in the process of interaction via SNSs. Unavoidably, SNSs might negatively influence learners' academic outcome and fitness if students spend much time and energy on SNSs. Thus, the length of time spent on SNSs should be controlled and the effective strategies of utilizing SNSs should be researched to decrease the passive influences of SNSs.

As for the significance and implications of this investigation, I hope that the knowledge of this study can be used when Chinese university educators design learning strategies adopting SNSs. Meanwhile, students would have a clear understanding of the benefits of SNSs and make full use of them of SNSs in their English language learning. Furthermore, this article could be useful to develop relevant policies which stimulate the usage of SNSs in English language learning. Besides, the findings would enlighten colleges and teachers to introduce SNSs in daily educational activities. Eventually, relevant researches in the future might focus on how to increase the effectiveness of learning English via SNSs.

In conclusion, according to the literature of this field and the critical analysis in this essay, the advantages of the utilization of SNSs in English study in Chinese universities outweigh the disadvantages.

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