Exploring Language Learning via Social Media Beyond the Classroom: A Case for *WeChat*

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1. Introduction

• “Social media has created possibilities for digitally native students to engage, interact and collaborate in learning tasks that foster learning processes and the overall learning experience” (Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014, p.339).

• Language learning is cognitive and collaborative procedure.

• Social media in language learning:
  
  ➢ an active way and interacting with the target language (Borau, Ullrich, Feng & Shen, 2009)

• Language learning beyond the classroom:
  
  ➢ can develop learners’ language abilities in social networking routines, rather the formal classroom contexts.
1. Introduction

Aims:

• Illustrate the affordances of social media;
• Consider the challenges and limitations of social media;
• Analyse the affordances and challenges of one of the most popular social media – WeChat;
• Raise considerations and recommendations in course design and pedagogy
2. A new approach in the new era: social media in language learning

What is social media?

- A variety of Internet-based applications built on the basis of Web 2.0, emphasising user-generated content that can be created and exchanged by users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012)

WeChat:

1. text-based messaging;
2. hold-to-talk voice messaging;
3. image messaging;
4. video call service
Constructivism:
- the vital influences of context in students’ learning (Dewey, 1916)

Sociocultural theory and social constructivism:
- the significance of culture and society in learners’ cognitive development and knowledge internalisation (Duguid, 1988)
- knowledge construction occurs through a social and collaborative process. (Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014)
- the importance of interaction and collaboration in language learning (Vygotsky, 1978)
3. The affordances of social media in language learning

1) Enhancing interaction, communication and collaboration

a. Creating active and communicative learning environments for raising questions and exchanging ideas.

• Facebook:
  — prompt interaction between users, benefit relationship-building and establish a sense of belonging (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010).

• Blogs:
  — play a significant role in developing teacher-student and student-student interactions (Aydin, 2014b).
3. The affordances of social media in language learning

1) Enhancing interaction, communication and collaboration

b. Contributing to learner’s language development

- Collaboration and knowledge sharing in social media contribute to targeted language learning and problem-solving cultivation (Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014);
- Sociolinguistic competence, referring to the ability to use and respond to language appropriately, could be improved via communication and collaboration (Borau et al., 2009);
- Social media are helpful in building new friendships through informal contact and beneficial for learner’s language development (Borau et al., 2009; Clark & Gruba, 2010; Zourou, 2012; Aydin, 2014b).

- Examples:
  - most participants believe Facebook could be used to develop their writing, reading and communication skills (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010);
  - blogs are effective in improving students’ speaking, reading and writing skills (Aydin, 2014b).
• Learning language from teachers
• Sharing their ideas and opinions of language and culture with others
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Aim(s)</th>
<th>Mode(s)</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Teacher assists learners to recall the language points and key expressions of last lesson.</td>
<td>helping learners recall the previous lessons</td>
<td>Text-based questions</td>
<td>5 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Teacher briefly introduces the background of today’s topic.</td>
<td>helping learners familiarise the topic</td>
<td>Short videos, pictures, voice messages, texts</td>
<td>5 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>Learners are invited to say anything about this topic based on their previous knowledge</td>
<td>helping learners activate their previous knowledge of this topic</td>
<td>Voice messages, texts</td>
<td>10 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Presentation normally bases on the four key points of the IELTS speaking test marking criteria- lexical resource, fluency &amp; coherence, grammatical range &amp; accuracy, pronunciation. Past exam questions will also be highlighted.</td>
<td>helping learners acquire key knowledge in lexical resource, fluency &amp; coherence, grammatical range &amp; accuracy, pronunciation</td>
<td>Short videos, pictures, voice messages, texts</td>
<td>20 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Learners freely discuss the questions about this topic and receive ideas from teacher and colleagues.</td>
<td>encouraging learners to actively participate in the class communication and collaboration</td>
<td>Voice messages, texts</td>
<td>10 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrapping-up</td>
<td>Teacher summaries the key knowledge points of this lesson.</td>
<td>Helping learners review the key knowledge points</td>
<td>Voice messages, texts</td>
<td>10 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After-class Tasks</td>
<td>Teacher assigns past exam questions in the group chat</td>
<td>Applying the language knowledge in real exam contexts</td>
<td>Voice messages</td>
<td>Completing the tasks before next session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2) Motivating students’ language learning

• Motivation:
  - attitude, desire and efforts to learn language

• The importance of motivation (Dörnyei, 2012):
  - assisting learners to complete their long-term goals
  - helping them make up for any gaps in aptitude or learning conditions

• Previous studies:
  - Facebook
    - beneficial in enhancing their communication, reading and writing motivations (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010)
  - Livemocha
    - a high level of interests under many circumstances such as browsing the new website, using the target language to communicate and reading articles written in the new language (Clark & Gruba, 2010)
3. The affordances of social media in language learning

2) Motivating students’ language learning

• **WeChat:**
  - **Teachers:** encouraging students by voice or texts
  - **Students:** inspiring their classmates by giving them the positive voice or text feedback
  - **Red pocket**
3. The affordances of social media in language learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Feedback (CN)</th>
<th>Translation (EN)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>太感谢了！期待每一次的英语课！</td>
<td>Thanks so much! I really look forward to attending the next session!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>我们这里学习氛围相当好！</td>
<td>The study atmosphere here is great!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>我喜欢这样的学习平台！</td>
<td>I like this learning platform!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>我可以随时随地学英语，真好！</td>
<td>I can study my English anywhere and anytime! Great!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Students’ positive feedback about the WeChat-based English Class*
4. The problems and challenges of social media in language learning

1) Information leak

- Privacy is one of main concerns about social media (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011).
- The popularity of Online Social Networks (OSN) has increased the possibility of leaking users’ personal information (Krishnamurthy & Wills, 2009).
- **WeChat:**
  - using mobile number as account and showing user’s profile
  - Third party access

**Solutions?**

- Teachers are responsible for teaching security and privacy issues to their students to enhance their information protection awareness.
- Students should be cautious when using social media.
4. The problems and challenges of social media in language learning

2) Distractions
   i. Students are easily distracted from finishing their academic tasks (Patera, Draper & Nael, 2008).
   ii. It is hard for people to switch off some non-academic features of social media because they take these for granted (James, 2012).
   iii. Participants could not concentrate on their academic tasks more than six minutes before switching to other features of social media (Rosen, Carrier & Cheever, 2013)

- Facebook:
  - a type of distraction (Wise, Skues & Williams, 2011)
- WeChat:
  - easily distracted by the chat notification
  - chat in the study group
3) Stereotypes

- Distractors/communication tools rather than academic platforms
  - **Facebook**: as a field to “share information or stories with friends (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010, p.185)”

- **In China**: difficult to accept it as a learning tool, and integrate it into language teaching and learning.

4. The problems and challenges of social media in language learning
4) Passive participation

- Aydin (2014a): EFL students in Turkey perform passively during the interaction. They prefer to read their teachers’ posts and messages, watch videos, and view user’s profiles.

- WeChat:
  - prefer to send asynchronous messages to their teachers when they have questions
  - prefer to keep silent
  - Just a few replies of answers
  - no extra comments and questions

4. The problems and challenges of social media in language learning
4) Passive participation

An example from the WeChat class

“...

- Teacher: [TEXT] 失物招领→lost and found. Please choose True or False and explain reasons.
- Student 1: [TEXT] True.
- Student 2: [TEXT] True.
- Teacher: [TEXT] Could you guys explain the reasons why you choose “True”? @Student 1@Student 2
- [Silence for 2 mins]
- Teacher: [TEXT] 右侧站立→keep right. Please choose True or False and explain reasons.
- Student 3: [TEXT] True.
- Student 4: [TEXT] True.
- Student 5: [TEXT] False.
- Teacher: [TEXT] Could you guys explain the reasons why you choose “True”? @Student 3@Student 4@Student 5
- [Silence for 2 mins]
..."
5. Recommendations and Considerations

(1) Course design:
- course content (Miller & Miller, 1999);
- difficulty of the course - Comprehensible Input Theory (Krashen, 1977);
- learning goals (Miller & Miller, 1999);
- learner characteristics (Miller & Miller, 1999);
- learners’ expectations (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin 2010; Tess, 2013)
(2) Pedagogical Suggestions (Aydin, 2014a)

a) Teachers’ role should be revised from that of a knowledge distributer to that of a supporter, encouraging learners and stimulating their potentials in language learning.

b) Teachers should spend more time in interacting and communicating with their students to build a strong friendship with them. This kind of harmonious relationship will break the barrier between teachers and students so that teachers can know students’ learning expectations, progress and problems better.

c) Teachers should not use rigorous participation disciplines that may impact a student’s learning motivation to learn. They should take actions (e.g. designing attractive learning activities, giving learners incentives, encouraging students, etc.) to help students familiarise themselves with social media and use it more effectively for their language learning.

5. Recommendations and Considerations
6. References


Thank you for your listening!