The role of social media on improving students' communication skills in English

Alisa Sadiku

[1*]*Department of Languages, Cultures and Communications, at SEEU, MK*
as12923@seeu.edu.mk

Abstract

Improving communication skills is one of the most desired skills that most language learners aim to achieve. However, teaching communication skills is a rather challenging process for teachers who find it difficult to expose students to communication experiences in real context. Moreover, due to various factors, it is also difficult to manage face to face communication with English native speakers on daily basis. However, with the advent of technology, the requirements for such opportunities can be met easily, as learners are becoming more and more computer literate, and different technological tools such as social media offering great assistance in providing situations where communication skills can be practiced and improved. Thus, this study aims to explore the impact of social media on promoting communication opportunities for students whose English is not their mother tongue. Particularly, this research describes how different elements that social media offer for oral and textual communication, assist in making learners feel confident and motivated to communicate in English. In addition, this paper will investigate ways how social media can promote student centered learning environment where students produce and learn language autonomously. In this light, social media affordances such as contextual and authentic communicational opportunities will be also taken into account.

Keywords: social media, communication skills, computer assisted language learning, technology

1. Introduction

With advancements in technology, social media has gone through a huge influence on the way in which people nowadays communicate. With this change, the need for good communication skills, in a target language, such as English has become undeniable. Hence, language teachers strive to look for ways how to achieve this important goal. One way to approach this is through incorporating computers in language teaching and learning process. Therefore, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has gained significant popularity among the researchers because it aims to find ways how to use technology to improve students' communication and collaboration. The first medium known as social networking is the email which was invented in 1972 by Ray Tomlinson. Nowadays, social media are far more sophisticated as users can present their profiles by posting different statuses, photos as well as communicate through various texting and voice chat tools incorporated in the social media platforms. The first social media of this kind were invented in 2003 as Myspace and Friendster and later Facebook which was publicly open in 2006 and is one of the most used social networking sites. Some other commonly known social media platform are Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Social media with various elements such as posts, hashtags, feeds, likes and pins have changed communication among societies as it has shifted peoples 'interactions from face to face communication to digital interactions. Thus, seeing this as a great potential in language learning, the main aim of this research is to explore how social media improves students' communicative competence and collaboration skills in learning English. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to explore its affordances through various Second Language Acquisition theories that support the usage of social media in enhancing students' communication skills. In other words, the aim is to present information on communication strategies (both verbally and nonverbally) in the process of advancing communicative competence and collaboration skills as an enjoyable learning experience that allows students to connect the communication situation to a real life event. I have also observed the usage of some strategies that reduce students' frustration and promote the transfer of acquired communication skills to the real world while being engaged in social media communication.

Communicative competence

Communicative competence has been widely accepted to be one of the basic goals in language teaching, unlike the previous assumptions that held grammatical competence in the center of classroom practice. "Therefore, we need to go one step further to realize that the focus should be on learning how people communicate in the target community, not on learning the language" (Lyu, 2006). According to Hymes communicative competence is "a person's ability to communicate in an appropriate way" (Garcia-Carbonell et al., 2001). Savignon (1983, as cited in Shih & Yang, 2008) refers to communicative competence as an "ability to conduct interpersonal negotiations, dealing with written and spoken language, using suitable ways of communicating depending on various conversational situations". On the other hand, Spitzberg (1988, as cited in Xiao & Guo-Ming, 2009) sees communicative competence as "the ability to interact well with others" by making their communication accurate, comprehensible, coherent, effective and appropriate. Specifically, communicative competence shows how one is able to use language to get a message across, rather than being focused on applying abstract grammar rules. In addition, Knight (as cited in Candlin & Mercer, 2001) claims that Communicative Language Teaching activities, such as using social media, create an environment where learners have desire to communicate something with purpose and focus on a rich content rather than on a particular language structure. In such activities, the role of the teacher is not to intervene or choose materials that will dictate the specific language forms the learners will use, but rather serve as a guide. Nevertheless, through social media learners get experiences of different kind, such as being exposed to communication with English Native Speakers. In this way, while experiencing the environment that surrounds them, the learners receive, "plenty of authentic communicative opportunities in the target language" (Knutson, 2003) which clearly shows how these two are intertwined.

Negotiation of meaning

Krashen (1985) "advises that students should be exposed to language that is slightly beyond their present level of proficiency" a concept that he refers to as I plus 1 (i+1) level. This level refers to an input "which is comprehensible, likely to be understood, and consequently acquired" (Foster & Ohta, 2005). In situations like this, not all learners are able to understand a message that is above their current knowledge. This is why it is expected that they face difficulties in expressing themselves. Nevertheless, learners should not feel discouraged, but rather need to seek ways how to overcome the comprehension difficulties in order that "incomprehensible or partly comprehensible input becomes comprehensible through negotiating meaning" (Long, 1980; Long & Porter, 1985 as cited in Dongping et al.). Clearly then, negotiation of meaning has to do with the mutual understanding of a message between the interlocutor and the second language learner by focusing on the meaning of messages conveyed (Sotillo, 2006,). In other words, in situations when learners cannot find the right words or word structures to express themselves, communication breakdowns occur, so they improvise with whatever language forms they have at hand just so they can get their message across. This helps learners produce a wide range of discourse structures for the sake of exchanging information with the interlocutors and finding ways to understand each other. In this study, I see negotiating of meaning as an important feature of communication and collaboration. This is so because in social media, students are more likely to meet users whose English is their native language. Furthermore, this implies that being exposed to a community where English is spoken in a level that is above student's actual language proficiency can trigger them to use language as means to understand their interlocutor, as well as to express and make themselves more understandable. Through social media, this challenge helps students to improvise with whatever language forms and vocabulary they have at hand, with the aim to get meaning across.

Communication strategies and conventions

In order negotiation of meaning to occur, learners need to use different modification devices, and to resort to what is known as communication strategies (CS), some of which I will explain in more details in this section (Table 1). Faucette (2001) refers to CSs as "the ways in which an individual speaker manages to compensate for the gap between what he/she wishes to communicate and his/her immediately available linguistic resources". Furthermore, Fernández Dobao, (2007) defines CSs as "devices language learners use to overcome linguistic difficulties encountered when trying to communicate in a foreign language with a reduced inter language system". In this light, I present a combination of lists of strategies proposed by Foster & Ohta, (2005) Tarone (1977, 1980, 1981), Poulisse (1993, 1997) (as cited in Fernández Dobao, 2007) and Yule (as cited in Faucette, 2001).

Communication strategy	Description of the strategy
STRATEGIES USED TO CHECK:	
Comprehension checks	"Expressions by a native speaker (NS) designed to establish whether that speaker's preceding utterance(s) had been understood by the interlocutor" (Foster & Ohta, 2005). They are "formed by tag questions, repetitions of all or part of the same speaker's preceding utterance(s) uttered with rising question intonation or utterances" (ibid). *E.g. 'Do you understand?'*
Confirmation checks	"Expressions by the NS immediately following an utterance by the interlocutor which was designed to elicit confirmation that the utterance had been correctly understood or correctly heard by the speaker" (ibid). "They involve repetition of all or part of the interlocutor's preceding utterance" and are "answerable by a simple confirmation in the event that the preceding utterance was correctly understood or heard and require no new information from the interlocutor" (ibid). It indicates a problem in conversation and it encourages the interlocutor to continue the sentence. (Varonis and Gass, 1985, as cited in Kötter, 2003). *E.g. 'Yes, Mmhm'*
Clarification checks	"Expressions by a NS designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance(s) (Foster & Ohta, 2005). "They are formed by "questions (wh- or yes-no questions), un-inverted intonation and tag questions, for they require that interlocutor either furnish new information or recode information previously given" (ibid). *E.g. 'I don't understand', 'Try again'.*
AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES	
a) Topic avoidance	"The speaker, lacking the necessary vocabulary to refer to an object or action, avoids any mention to it." (Fernandes Dobao, 2007) *E.g. 'wears a … pair of enormous trousers' (braces) (ibid).*
b) Message abandonment	"The speaker begins to talk about a concept but, feeling unable to continue, stops before reaching their communicative goal" (ibid). *E.g. 'a shirt with … eh … umm … … I don't know' (tie).*
c) Semantic avoidance	"The speaker says something different from what was originally intended" (ibid). *E.g. 'an eye mm … very damaged' (black eye).*
d) Message reduction	"The learner reduces their original message, reports the same idea but with less precision and detail" (ibid). *E.g. 'some kind of … uniform' (school uniform).*
ACHIVEMENT STRATEGIES	
1. Paraphrasing	
a) Approximation	"The speaker substitutes the desired unknown target language item for a new one, which is assumed to share enough semantic features with it to be correctly interpreted" (Fernandes Dobao, 2007). *E.g. 'you can see aaa … a pigeon hole' (letterbox)' 'fish for crap'.*
b) Word coinage	"The learner makes up a new word following the target language rules of derivation and composition" (ibid, p.90). *E.g. 'houseshoes' (slippers)' 'fish zoo for aquarium'.*
c) Circumlocution	"The learner describes an object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item" (ibid) or through description of its characteristics such as shape color, function (Faucette, 2001). *E.g. 'The thing you open bottles with for cork screw'.*

2. Conscious transfer	
a) Borrowing	"The learner uses an L1 item or structure modified in accordance with the features of the target language" (Fernandes Dobao, 2007). *E.g. 'a bit more … a bit more debilish no well' (weak).*
b) Language switch	"The speaker uses an L1 item with no modification at all" (ibid). *E.g. 'and he has mm… umm … unha pucha' (cap).*
3 Appeal for assistance	"The learner asks the interlocutor for lexical help" (Faucette, 2001). *E.g. 'how do you call this?' (chin).*
4 Mime, emoticons, smiles	"The learner uses a gesture or any other paralinguistic form" (ibid). *E.g. 'learner mimics knocking' (doorknocker).*
5 Time-stalling devices	"Hesitation devises used to fill pauses to gain time to think" (ibid). *E.g. 'Umm, give me a minute to think about that'.*

Table 1: Communication strategies and conventions

Social constructivism

Another learning theory which is quite applicable when it comes to using social media in enhancing communication skills is the social constructivism theory. Chee (2001) explains this theory by stating that for the new knowledge to be acquired with understanding, the content needs to be meaningful to the learner so they can personally construct knowledge while being engaged in active exploration. Furthermore, Winn (1993, as cited in Javidi, 1999) claims that social constructivism is established on two assumptions. One is that "knowledge is constructed through social negotiation" and the other one is that "reality is to some extent subjective". Consequently, in order knowledge to be understood and applied naturally by the learner, it needs to be acquired in social contexts since we all interpret the world differently, based on our own experiences, beliefs and knowledge. So, to summarize what many believe (Carr, Jonassen, Litzinger, & Marra, 1998, as cited in Schwienhorst, 2002) the idea behind this theory is that: (a) "learners do not receive bits of knowledge and store them in their heads, but rather they take in information from the world and then construct their own view of that knowledge domain", and (b) "all knowledge is stored and accessed by an individual via experiences associated with knowledge in a particular domain". Likewise, constructivists hold the belief that learners need to be surrounded with an environment where they explore and experiment the knowledge they gain through interaction with their teachers, peers and the subject matter. This means that, constructivism focuses on learner centered environments where the learners are given the opportunity to "explore knowledge domain and construct knowledge of that domain through a combination of collaboration, discussions with their teacher, self-assessment, and reflection" (Javidi, 1999). When students try to explore and solve a problem by reflecting on their experiences they are actually in the process of constructing their own understanding, and they understand what they have constructed themselves (Lamon, 2011). In other words, students need to be actively engaged in problem solving and critical thinking of contextual problems, in this case communicating in authentic environments. By doing so, they are spontaneously involved in discussions, sharing and comparing points of views, which also helps them make connections between the past and the new information.

Moreover, Vygotsky's (1978, as cited in Harmon, 2008) negotiation of meaning plays a significant role in constructing knowledge. According to him, the social negotiation gives the opportunity for individuals "to test their constructions against one another and to gain new understandings from one another" (ibid). This occurs as a result of the reflection upon the variance among their individual conceptions. In this light, constructivism is established on assumptions that knowledge is constructed through social negotiation (Winn, as cited in Javidi, 1999). Vygotsky (ibid) adds that the social constructivism is a connection between the individual and society as well as the effect of social interaction, language, and culture on learning. According to him, this also depends on the social experience, that is, "the force of the cognitive process deriving from the social interaction" (ibid). Similarly, Dede (1995 as cited in Javidi, 1999) points out that, constructivism together with the theory of negotiation of meaning fits very well in social media communications. In this case, while being exposed to the social media, learners get the chance to construct their meaning by not being focused on learning the language forms only but rather learning how to use the language through communication and collaboration with others. In addition, the vast opportunities of social media gives students ample opportunities to explore the environment and thus spontaneously and naturally construct their own knowledge while interacting with NSs in contextual

situations. In essence, the more learners independently construct their meaning, the more they are able to freely communicate and collaborate with their peers. Social media represents a great tool that can help bridge the distance between the learners and the target NSs, thus providing realistic socio cultural contexts for language learning (Schwienhorst, 2002). Moreover, social media can offer learners the chance to experience social interactions that they can have in real life since not everyone can have the chance to talk to NS in real life settings and in regular basis. Besides this, while using social media, students learn the language not by getting explanations from the users about what language forms they should use in a particular context but rather by spontaneously interacting with the environment and the users.

Anxiety and affective barriers

Usage of social media has also the affordance of giving its users the opportunity to communicate without the anxiety of not being understood or judged by the interlocutors. This is supported by what Krashen (1985) refers to as the affective filter hypothesis which suggests that affective factors like anxiety may cause "a mental block that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device". So, if we create a relaxed and unthreatened environment, the affective barrier will be lowered. This way the students will be able to acquire the language input and will feel positive and motivated to participate in communication activities. Fortunately in using social media, pressure is removed. One of the reasons why affective barriers are lowered through this media is that students that are normally shy to communicate face to face will take part more actively by using the synchronous chat (Freiermuth, 2002 as cited in Ranalli, 2008, p.442). Furthermore, social media endeavor to make students participate actively without having concerns about their mistakes, but instead prioritize communication over accuracy, a concept that Krashen (1985) calls natural communicative input. According to this "acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language, when speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding". A major obstacle that we should take into consideration is that not always can learners communicate and collaborate freely. Their willingness to communicate depends on several factors like: "student's personality, social situation, communicative competence, the desire to communicate with a particular peer, etc." (Chapelle, 2001, as cited in Zorko, 2009).

Conclusions

Social media can create a relaxing environment where students have free and casual conversation. Moreover, it promotes negotiation of meaning among the students and the NSs as students have the chance to improve the structure of their utterances when they are not understood by the interlocutors, using different communication strategies. Social media as an environment that triggers social negotiation among the users also helps them construct new knowledge by exploring the environment. Studies suggests that in social media students established a sense of being together in an actual place with their interlocutor. Social Media also gives students opportunity to be involved in authentic and contextual tasks where they use language as in real world situations and have ample opportunities to discuss various topics. To sum up, as technology is developing and the students are becoming more and more technology literate, a medium that can help in creating communication and collaboration opportunities is more than welcomed. As such, social media has shown great potential in enhancing these skills. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges for today's teachers is to find methods and strategies that will help them incorporate these new technological requirements in their teaching process.

References

[1]. Candlin, N. Ch., & Mercer, N. (2001). English Language Teaching in Its Social Context: A Reader. Routledge.

[2]. Chee, S. Y. (2001). Virtual Reality in Education: Rooting Learning in Experience. Invited talk. In Proceedings of the International Symposium on Virtual Education 2001, Busan, South Korea. Symposium Organizing Committee, Dongseo University.

[3]. Dongping, Zh., Wagner, M. M., Young, F. M. & Brewer, A. R. (2009). Negotiation for Action: English Language Learning in Game-Based Virtual Worlds. The Modern Language Journal, 93, IV.

[4]. Faucette, P. (2001). A pedagogical perspective of communication strategies: Benefits of training and an analysis of English language teaching materials. University of Hawaii. SLS papers, vol. 19, no.2.

[5]. Fernández Dobao, M. A., & Palacio Martinez M. I. (2007). Negotiating Meaning in Interaction between English and Spanish Speakers via Communicative Strategies. Atlantis 29.1.

[6]. Foster, P. & Ohta, S. A. (2005). Negotiation for meaning and peer assistance in second language classrooms. Applied Linguistics, Vol.26, No.3.

[7]. Garcia-Carbonell, A., Rising, B., Montero, B. & Watts, F. (2001). Simulation/gaming and the acquisition of communicative competence in another language. Simulation & Gaming. Vol. No. 32.

[8]. Harmon, W. S. (2008). A Theoretical Basis for Learning in Massive Multiplayer Virtual Worlds. Georgia State University. Vol. 1, No.1.

[9]. Javidi, G. (1999). Virtual Reality and Education. University of South Florida.

[10]. Knutson, S. (2003). Experiential Learning in Second-Language Classrooms. TESL Canada Journal, vol. 20, No.2.

[11]. Krashen, S. D. (1985). The input hypothesis. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

[12]. Lamon, M. (2011). Learning theory – Constructivist approach

[13]. Lyu, Y. (2006). Simulations and Second / Foreign Language Learning: Improving communication skills through simulations. The University of Toledo.

[14]. Schwienhorst, K. (2002). Why virtual, why environments? Implementing virtual reality concepts in computer-assisted language learning. Simulation & gaming: an interdisciplinary journal, Vol. 33, No.2.

[15]. Shih, Y.-C., & Yang, M.-T. (2008). A Collaborative Virtual Environment for Situated Language Learning Using VEC3D. Educational Technology & Society, Vol. 11, No.1.

[16]. Sotillo, S. (2006). Using instant messaging for collaborative learning: A case study. Innovate, Vol. 2, No.3.

[17]. Xiao, X. & Guo-Ming, Ch. (2009). Communication competence and moral competence: A Confucian Perspective. Journal of Multicultural Discourses. Vol. 4, No. 1.

[18]. Zorko, V. (2009). Factors affecting the way students collaborate in a wiki for English language learning. Australian Journal of Educational Technology. Vol. 5, No.25.