

Social media in language learning: a mixed-methods investigation of Saudi students' perceptions

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Abstract. This study investigates Saudi students' attitudes towards the use of four Social Media (SM) applications for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL): Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Ninety-nine adult students participated in this mixed-methods study, which included surveys and interviews to examine their perception of SM as pedagogical tools. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVAs) revealed that there are differences between beginner and advanced students in their perceptions of the usefulness of SM applications for language learning, but not in their affective feelings towards SM for use outside the classroom, nor their choice of SM application for learning. In addition, groups' choices of SM varied according to language purposes and skills to be learned. Further qualitative analysis revealed that advanced learners are reluctant to use SM for academic purposes, considering them to be their own social (not educational) spaces.

Keywords: social media, language learning, perceptions, attitudes.

1. Introduction

Previous research has reported students' positive perceptions towards using SM for academic purposes (e.g. Lee & Markey, 2014). However, researchers have also reported a possible variance in perceptions because of students' proficiency level (Gamble & Wilkins, 2014). Interestingly, studies in the context of general education found that students hold negative attitudes towards using SM for educational purposes (Venkatesh et al., 2016). The factors that motivated this study include: the mixed findings reported above, and the lack or scarcity of studies that: (1) focus on Arab users of SM (particularly those from Saudi Arabia),

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(2) investigate more recent SM applications (e.g. Snapchat and Instagram), (3) examine SM's pedagogical usefulness (e.g. whether learners' SM choices differ according to the targeted language skill to be learned), and (4) that probe students' affective feelings towards them. As such, the ultimate goal of this study is to inform language teachers who consider adopting SM to extend their classroom practices. Four Research Questions (RQs) guided this study:

- What are students' perceptions of the usefulness of four SM applications (i.e. WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter) and their affective feelings towards their pedagogical use? Are these perceptions affected by users' proficiency level in English?
- Are there differences in student use of SM applications for different language purposes?
- Which SM application(s) do students prefer for learning English? Are there differences in students' SM choices according to the targeted language skills?
- What are Saudi students' perceived advantages and disadvantages of learning EFL through SM?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Ninety-nine EFL students from King Saud University in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) were randomly selected to participate in the study. They were stratified among two proficiency levels determined by their institution: beginners (24 males, 25 females, mean age 21) and advanced (25 males, 25 females, mean age 23).

2.2. Materials and procedure

An initial online survey was created to determine SM applications used by Saudis. The survey was distributed via SM and yielded around 800 responses revealing that WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter were the top most used SM in Saudi Arabia. Based on these results, a six-point Likert scale survey was created and distributed to the participants. This survey was designed to elicit students'

perceptions towards the usefulness of SM, students' affective feelings towards SM use for language learning, and SM choices when used for learning EFL. Finally, open-ended semi-structured oral interviews were also conducted with 14 randomly selected participants to obtain qualitative data about their perceptions of their English-learning experience using the four SM applications targeted by this research.

3. Results

A two-way analysis of variance was run to answer the first RQ and part of the third RQ; consequently, alpha was reduced to $p=0.017$ to account for the number of ANOVAs conducted. The remaining quantitative data were answered through means of frequency counts.

For RQ1, the statistical results indicated that there were differences in the perceived usefulness of SM as a learning tool between beginner and advanced students ($p=0.014$). Advanced participants significantly viewed Twitter more useful than the other three SMs, while Snapchat and Instagram did not differ from each other, and WhatsApp was perceived as the least useful: Twitter>Snapchat=Instagram>WhatsApp; where > indicates more useful/preferred than). For beginner students, only WhatsApp was different from the other three applications, being perceived as less useful, while Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter were nearly identical in usefulness: Twitter=Snapchat=Instagram>WhatsApp.

However, the two proficiency groups did not differ in their affective feelings towards SM use outside the classroom, nor in their choice of application for learning purposes. As such, students had significantly less affective feelings towards using WhatsApp for learning than Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. Interestingly, Twitter was the only application viewed positively by both groups for its learning potential.

Regarding RQ2 and 3, data analysis revealed that students' SM preferences varied according to different language purposes and the targeted language skills to be learned: both groups favoured WhatsApp for communication with family and friends, Twitter for reading, and Snapchat for learning aural skills (listening and speaking). As for vocabulary, grammar and writing, advanced students preferred Twitter while beginners chose WhatsApp.

Students also reported that the main advantages of using SM for learning (RQ4) were the availability and affordability of these applications, in addition to offering

an opportunity to practise English and immerse themselves in the L2 environment, especially when L2 English use in Saudi Arabia is usually limited and often confined to the classroom. Most participants mentioned that they often pay attention to their grammar and vocabulary before posting in SM. They also reported some disadvantages regarding the use of SM for L2 learning. Advanced learners fear lack of privacy and expressed concerns that the academic use of SM might inhibit their overall enjoyment using them. The two groups also expressed concerns regarding the accuracy of information found on SM, as well as the spelling and grammar errors observed in such platforms, thus questioning its suitability for language learning. Other issues such as the lack of feedback and being distracted by other features in the selected SM platforms were also expressed.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated Saudi students' attitudes towards the use of four social media applications for learning EFL. Results indicated that there were differences in the perceived usefulness of SM as a learning tool between beginner and advanced students; however, the groups did not differ in their affective feelings towards SM use outside the classroom, nor in their choice of application for learning. Twitter, on the other hand, was viewed positively by both groups for its learning potential. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data gives us some explanations for such differences in perception between the two groups regarding SM's ability to support learning. For advanced learners, 'supportive' means with minimum teacher involvement (e.g. completed independently), as SM is perceived as their private space. For beginners, 'supportive' denotes learning with additional resources to what is already provided in the classroom, which may also be teacher-guided. Both groups therefore accept SM as pedagogical tools, but differently: one as a complement (advanced) and the other as an extension (beyond).

Favouring Snapchat for listening and speaking can be attributed to the services offered by the application, as it offers instant, but temporary, video chat. Without the ability to review previous videos, learners probably feel less embarrassed if they make mistakes, as the videos disappear within seconds.

Many factors may have contributed to Saudi students' overall preference for Twitter. First, Twitter is quick and easy to use, limits the length of user posts to 280 characters, and is accessed by many users around the world, regardless of age, cultural background, or profession. Secondly, our qualitative results suggest that Twitter is a platform on which students can freely express their thoughts, state their

opinions, and engage in discussions – activities which they do not usually engage in in any other SM. Participants also associate Twitter with receiving breaking news, accessing information, and communicating with experts. In addition, students use it for formal practices, and they seem to behave more seriously on Twitter than on other SM applications given that Twitter is associated with intellectual discourse in politics, religion, and culture (see, for example, the current use of Twitter by politicians, royalty, and political figures such as Trump, Trudeau, King Salman, and the Pope). Therefore, Twitter is perceived as an acceptable medium for pedagogical purposes.

The results indicate that there are differences in the perceived usefulness of SM as a learning tool between beginner and advanced students, and that students' preferences for SM vary according to the targeted language skill (e.g. Snapchat for listening and speaking and Twitter for reading). As such, our findings reinforce the prevalence of Twitter among the other SM applications for language learning, and indicate that beginner students are more willing to use SM outside the classroom for pedagogical purposes. Advanced learners, on the other hand, claim SM as their personal space, thus disfavours its use as it might interfere with their private lives.

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