

Using Social Media to Enhance English Language Skills: An Exploratory Study Conducted at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language in South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

With the exponential growth in internet, the social media affordance has dominated the lifestyles of the undergraduates in Sri Lanka, and by integrating social media platforms in to teaching English, learning will be more appealing even to unmotivated learners in the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language (FIA). The main objective of this paper is to examine whether Social Media can be used as a pedagogical tool to enhance the English language skills of the undergraduates of FIA. Adopting a quantitative approach, an online questionnaire was administered among the 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates of FIA using email. Quantitative data collected from the respondents was critically analysed using Excel and SPSS. The findings reveal that the undergraduates devote approximately 72 minutes daily on social media, which is three times more than the time spent on traditional media. In considering social media usage, around 96% of respondents use WhatsApp and 72% of them use YouTube. Facebook and Twitter are used by 52% and 26% respectively. In considering the preferred language, interestingly, 46% type English texts in English letters and an equal percent type Tamil/Sinhala in English letters and another 8% type Tamil/Sinhala in Tamil/Sinhala letters. In seeking information and clarifying doubts in English language, Google search was ranked first with 94% and the next was YouTube videos with 32%. The T-Testing result reveals that social media helps the undergraduates to improve their spoken and reading skills but writing skills are not significantly improved. The study concludes that social media affordance is a preferred platform that can be used to enhance the undergraduates' English language skills as almost all of them show familiarity and preference to Social Media. It is notable that undergraduates use social media mostly to retrieve and share information rather than create content and get news.

Keywords: Social media, affordance, English language skills, FIA undergraduates

Introduction

The exponential growth in internet has replaced traditional media, paving way for the creation of a platform for educational purposes (Andrews, 2019). The technological affordance provided to English language teaching has contributed significantly in promoting verbal literacy and digital fluency (Huffaker, 2005). By integrating social media in to teaching English at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, learning can be more appealing (Campbell, 2003) as this can boost social interaction and information sharing among the teachers and the learners. During the period from 2005 to 2010, the number of internet users as per the world population percentage has increased from 15.7% to 30.2% and it has grown up to 54% in 2019 (Internet World Stats, 2019). With internet being accessible in almost all parts of the world, Social Media (SM) has gained popularity, particularly the Facebook in 2004 (Carlson, 2010) Twitter in 2006 (Carlson, 2011), WhatsApp in 2009 and Instagram in 2010 (Brown, 2018). The SM affordance has dominated the lifestyle of the "Z" generation and "Millennials" who emerged after the 1990's (Kasasa, 2019) and its

applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram etc. have provided the users a platform for social interaction, information sharing, socialization and adaptation to University life among students and instructors (Yu et. al, 2010).

Research has found that 1.93 billion people utilize mobile technology to access social media applications (Regan, 2015) and in the context of Sri Lanka, it has been found that there are 22.1 million mobile phones in use, which is more than the population (Liyanage, 2015). Among the undergraduates, mobile phone is considered as an indispensable tool (Jayawardhana, 2015). With the increase in the number of smart phone users in the university, there is opportunity to integrate social media applications in enhancing their English language skills. This creates a conundrum whether SM platforms provide opportunities to enhance English language skills of the undergraduates in the Faculty of Islamic studies and Arabic Language (FIA).

The main objective of this paper is to examine whether SM can be used as a pedagogical tool to enhance the English language skills of the undergraduates of FIA. In order to assess this criterion, the following research questions should be addressed.

- What is the proportion of time, the undergraduates of FIA spend in social media?
- To what extent do undergraduates of FIA use social media to enhance English language skills?
- Can Social media be used as a pedagogical tool to enhance English language skills of the undergraduates of FIA?

Literature review

Social media is the software tools which is used to generate contents from the user and provides a mechanism to share these contents among other users through a web platform. (Paquette, 2013). Adding to this definition, (Haenlein, 2010) states that the introduction of Web 2.0 in 2004 caused a drastic development in social media platform.

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In 2019, globally 3.02 billion people accessed the social media platform which represents 40% of the entire population (Statista, 2019). In ranking the number of users in each platform in 2019, Facebook leads the list with a value of 2.32 billion and then YouTube with 1.9 billion, WhatsApp with 1.6 billion and Instagram with 1 billion (Statista, 2019). These figures clearly show the strength of the global online virtual community built through these platforms. In Sri Lanka, there are 6 million active SM users, of whom 92% access it through mobile and it is notable that 26% are daily active users (Jain, 2018). In Sri Lanka, there is an apparent drop in traditional media like television, radio and newspaper. In considering the newspaper readers in Sri Lanka, there has been an increasing trend from 2010 to 2016 but in 2017, the number of users has fallen by 5.2 percent (EconomyNext, 2018). On the other hand, the internet penetration in Sri Lanka in 2009 (after the end of the civil war) was 8.2 percent and in 2016 it has risen up to 29.3 percent (Internet Live Stats, 2016). In 2018, the internet users have increased at an alarming rate, approximating 6.1 million, of whom, 96 percent of the people use Facebook (Jain, 2018). Thuseethan and Vasanthapriyan (2015) conducted a survey with 1000 participants throughout Sri Lanka and they concluded that 75% of the respondents use social networks to get the current news and the rest 25% use other

modes to reach the current news. This shows that the Sri Lankans are moving from traditional devices to digital devices.

With this swing, the way the undergraduates interact, communicate and learn also needs a shift to promote collaborative learning.

As a platform for English language learning, SM can be used as a pedagogical tool to support active participation and collaborative learning (Junco, 2011). SM provides opportunities to exchange limitless number of texts, messages, images and videos (Evans, 2014), which can be used as a writing space to edit, add and share communication material according to the intended objectives, thereby promoting student centred learning. Research has found that internet mediated teaching helps to improve communication skills among students (Tanti, 2010) and this mode of teaching can make learning appealing to shy and unmotivated learners (Cummings, 2004). According to Roblyer et al. (2010), Facebook has the potential to become a valuable resource to support students' educational communication and collaboration in the faculty. Kim (2012) added that SM platform is not only an effective e-learning methodology but also an effective way of providing social support. Twitter is another networking platform for academic and co-curricular discussion (Junco, 2011). According to Chao and Lo (2001), Blogs, Wikis, and Forums have been used to facilitate collaborative writing. Scholars have found that Facebook and twitter enhance communication skills and can be used as a pedagogical tool as it has the potentiality to be exploited for language learning. By facilitating communication and sharing among the undergraduates, the use of SM can extend learning beyond the classroom, providing an opportunity to blend both formal and informal learning. This way of learning encourages learners to be acculturated to self - regulated learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012).

SM platforms are not without their disadvantages. When there is a possibility of spreading hatred speech and violence, the government has the authority to block the SM sites. The Easter terror attack which took place on 21st April 2019 (Lytvynenko, 2019) led the government to block the SM sites for a span of a week to calm the situation and later, after 3 weeks, the SM was banned to prevent the eruption of communal riots. In the same way, when SM is blocked due to any uneventful situation, this will not be accessible to all, creating a potential risk for the users who rely only on SM. Liyanage (2015) conducted a study to examine mobile usage among the undergraduates of Sri Lanka, and found that students devote at least two hours per day on mobile phones, which is more than the time spent on their studies.

Methodology

A quantitative approach was adopted. The target group for this research were the 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates from FIA. An online questionnaire was administered among the target respondents using email. Quantitative data collected from the respondents was critically analysed using excel and statistical analysis technique such as T-Testing in SPSS. The final sample consisted 100 respondents. Secondary sources like online articles and journals were also used. The main limitation was the uncertainty whether the respondents found any difficulty in comprehending the questions with clarity.

The independent variable is social media and the dependent variable is providing opportunity for undergraduates to learn English.

The formulated hypothesis is:

H₀ - SM does not provide opportunities for undergraduates to enhance their English language skills.

H₁ - SM provides opportunities for undergraduates to enhance their English language skills.

The hypothesis testing was carried out using the t-testing. As H_1 is having a range, single tailed t-testing was conducted. The confidence level used for T-testing is 95% and a test value of 3.0 was considered for the study.

Findings and discussions

The questionnaire was circulated via e-mail to the 2nd and 3rd year students of FIA and the response shows that the second year constitutes 62% of the sample. The distribution of respondents according to gender shows that 70% of females and 30% of males have attempted the questionnaire. Among the respondents, Newspaper usage was 48% and television, 44% with only 7% of radio usage. The respondents who do not use traditional media amounts to be 28%, indicating that 72% of them use at least one of the traditional devices on daily basis. In considering SM, around 96% of respondents use WhatsApp and 72% of them use YouTube. Facebook and Twitter are used by 52% and 26% respectively. Of the total sample, only 6% do not use the social media sites. When comparing this value with undergraduates who do not use traditional media, it is evident that undergraduates mostly use SM sites than traditional media.

It was found that 22% of the respondents use SM to communicate with an aim of maintaining relationship with users and the same percent use it as a source of entertainment while 18% use it to discuss course related matters and share with others. It is notable that 26% of the respondents use social media to search information related to academic work. There is only 8% who use it to share information regarding similar interests. The findings also show that a negligible percent of them use it to get current news. In considering the preferred language, there were 46% who type English texts in English letters and an equal percent who type Tamil/Sinhala in English letters and another 8% who type Tamil/Sinhala in Tamil/Sinhala letters. Of the 54% who express their views in mother tongue, there were 46% of them who use English letters. Conversely, 40% of them agree that the language they use to type texts help them to improve English language skills, of whom 26% strongly agree.

In seeking information and clarifying doubts in English language, respondents could opt multiple options. According to the responses, Google search was ranked first with 94%, then YouTube videos with 32% and the next was clarifying from peers, which was 26% and the least was clarifying from lecturers, which was only 8%. For the question asked whether the use of short forms/abbreviations in typing texts interfere in their academic writing, 46% agree with 18% strongly agree. It was found that 64% of the respondents agree social media as a platform to interact and collaborate while only 8% disagree and none strongly disagree.

In considering their familiarity with social media, it was found that 38% of them have been using social media for less than three years and 32% from 3-5 years and only 16% from 5-8 years. It is noteworthy that 38% of them may have started using it after coming to university and the 14% who have been using it for more than 8 years, probably may have been exposed to this culture even before coming to university.

In considering the group accounts they possess, it was found that 56% have 2-5 academic accounts and 46% have 2-5 social group accounts. It is interesting to note that there is none who does not own a social group account. While there are 32% who own more than 5 academic group accounts, there are 44% who own more than 5 social group accounts.

In checking their group accounts, the daily basis ranks high with 74% checking their academic group accounts daily and 86% checking their social group accounts daily.

To find the proportionate of time spent on traditional devices and social media, descriptive statistics was used as shown in Table 1 and Table 2

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Average time spent on traditional device	100	1.00	5.00	1.7600	1.14698
Valid N (listwise)	100				

The fourth question was asked to find out how much time an undergraduate spends in traditional media in the devices they selected in question three. Among the undergraduates, 54% of respondents use traditional media for an average time of 0 - 30 minutes daily and 28% use for 30 - 60 minutes. Respondents who use traditional media for more than 2 hours was 6%, which is significantly a small percentage. The mean value obtained falls in the range of 0 - 30 minutes. The descriptive statistics in table 1 shows a mean value of 1.76, resulting in a value of 22 minutes, being the average time spent on traditional media.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Average time spent on Social Media / Internet	100	1.00	5.00	3.4000	1.39262
Valid N (list wise)	100				

The sixth question was asked to find out how much time an undergraduate spends in social media sites they selected in question five. Among the undergraduates, 32% of respondents use Social Media sites for more than 2 hours and an equal percent use between 60- 90 minutes. There was only 10%, who fall within the range of 0 – 30 minutes. The descriptive statistics in table 2 shows a mean value of 3.4 that falls in the range of 60 - 90 minutes. The conversion of mean value of 3.4 to minutes results in a value of 72 minutes, being the average time spent by undergraduates in SM. This amount is three times more than the time spent on traditional media. The result shows that undergraduates spend significantly more time in social media than traditional devices.

Analysis of hypothesis

Q11 - Social Media/internet helps you to improve your fluency in English:

Table 3: One-sample test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your fluency in English	100	3.710	1.0376	.1038		
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your fluency in English	6.843	99	.000	.7100	.504	.916

The mean value attributed to null hypothesis is $\mu_0 = 3$ and the mean value obtained for the sample is 3.7, which is approximately equivalent to the “Agree” option as given in table 3. The t value obtained for this test is 6.843, which is higher than the T (100,95%) value of 1.660. Therefore, there is enough evidence to reject null hypothesis in 95% confidence level and alternative hypothesis can be accepted.

Q12 - Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your English reading skills:

Table 4: One-sample test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your English reading skills	100	3.7600	1.24007	.12401		
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	

Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your English reading skills	6.129	99	.000	.76000	.5139	1.0061
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The mean value attributed to null hypothesis is $\mu_0 = 3$ and the mean value obtained for the sample is 3.76, which is approximately equivalent to the “Agree” option as given in table 3. The t value obtained for this test is 6.129, which is higher than the T (100,95%) value of 1.660. Therefore, there is enough evidence to reject null hypothesis in 95% confidence level and alternative hypothesis can be accepted.

Q13 - Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your English writing skills

Table 4: One-sample test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your English writing skills	100	3.1800	1.31333	.13133		
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
Social Media / Internet helps you to improve your English writing skills	1.371	99	.174	.18000	-.0806	.4406

The mean value attributed to null hypothesis is $\mu_0 = 3$ and the mean value obtained for the sample is 3.18, which is approximately equivalent to the “Agree” option as given in table 4. The t value obtained for this test is 1.371, which is lower than the T (100,95%) value of 1.660. Therefore, there is enough evidence to accept null hypothesis in 95% confidence level and alternative hypothesis can be rejected.

According to the T-Testing carried out, Social Media helps the undergraduates to improve their spoken and reading skills but writing skills are not significantly improved. In considering the undergraduates of FIA, they seem to be unaware of the potential of the SM as a platform to improve their writing skills. Hence there is a need to create awareness about the SM affordance of blogs that can be used as a pedagogical tool to improve their writing skill.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social media affordance is a preferred platform that can be used to enhance the undergraduates' English skills as almost all of them show familiarity and preference to Social Media. The study shows evidence that WhatsApp is the mostly used application to communicate, discuss, share notes, slides and information related to academic activities and Facebook for building relationships and exchanging ideas on similar interest. Google search is also widely used to seek wanted information. It is notable that the undergraduates use social media mostly to retrieve and share information rather than create content and get news.

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