

Social Media in ESL Classroom: Wechat

Puspalatha C. Suppiah¹, Kuldip Kaur², Nalini Arumugam³ &
Mohamad Idham⁴

^{1,3}Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, ^{2,4}Universiti Teknologi MARA, Lendu Melaka

Corresponding author: kksekhon@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of undergraduates regarding the relevance of social media, the WeChat application platform, towards improving reading comprehension skills in English as a Second Language. At the same time, the study wants to find out the influence of social media platform usage on language learning towards improving students' critical thinking skills given its association with the reading comprehension skill. The results show important information on students' use of WeChat for ESL learning intentions. The ease of use and the structural characteristics of these tools engage students in critical thinking; enhance communication, reading, and writing skills while sharing information and modification. As for educators, it is to be noted that students prefer their presence in an online learning community. They need a teacher to guide them and provide helpful feedback related to learning. It is concluded that although using social media provides students with an enriched learning experience, students shared that they need a teacher to plan and execute teaching and learning activities effectively. Consequently, teachers can opt for more reference sources to consider when they design curricula.

Keywords: WeChat, Social Media, Reading, Critical Thinking, Teacher

Introduction

Malaysia has a record number of 68% Internet users compared to the global average of 46%, according to the recent 2016 international research on social media. There are 18 million active social media users and as high as 16 million of them access it via their mobile devices (Chaffey, 2016). The high ratio of social media platform users signifies the best opportunity available for ESL learners to initiate social media as a channel for language learning (Arumugam et al., 2020); Shanti, et al., 2019). Among these popular platforms, WeChat has the most significant potential, judging from its rapid 7% growth trend of 650 million out of 697 million users over three months from January to April 2016 (Chaffey, 2016). WeChat has been consistently ranked among the top 5 social media and communication apps in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore (Soo, 2015). These tools' ease of use and structural characteristics potentially support language learning and a community-based learning environment. It can engage students in critical thinking, enhancing communication and

reading/writing skills while sharing information, content creation, knowledge, and information aggregation and modification time to be spent on the reading process itself, thus affecting work performance (Geraldine, 2013; Lin et al., 2021).

Many students graduate with good grades but are unable to perform well at work due to a lack of meaningful learning experience related to using the language appropriately and accurately (Bob et al., 2013). As reading is an interactive process, readers interact with the text by engaging the knowledge they hold to construct the meaning of the text they are reading. But poor reading skills hinder comprehension, causing more time to be spent on the reading process itself, thus affecting work performance. Learning is a life-long experience where individuals go through different phases of development, usually building on skills introduced at several stages of their learning. An educator's responsibility is not just about producing academically excellent students but also about ensuring that students can apply the skills learned to their daily life.

Social Media for Language Learning using WeChat Application

Social media, in general, facilitates communication, the sharing of information, and online socialization (Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014) and thus the use of these tools for educational purposes provides plenty of benefits. Social media has been one of the most interesting areas for research due to its capabilities to offer educators and learners with enhanced experience in teaching and learning. The ease of use and familiarity of social media applications such as Facebook, WeChat, Skype, wiki, etc. have enabled resource and knowledge sharing to become fast and convenient.

Many studies on social media in the education context show the significant relationship between collaborative learning and students' performance. Mugahed et al (2015) showed that social media enables collaborative learning and interaction that improves the academic achievement of students. Penekham (2014) qualitatively explored social media functions in New Zealand's higher education and discovered that social media is primarily used for informal collaborative learning with peers, facilitating studies, and exchanging social support. Nevertheless, the finding suggests that the use of social media to support class work facilitates learning activities, benefits learners, and enriches the learners' learning experience. In the year 2011, a researcher in Japan has use Facebook to help a lower language proficiency class to become more comfortable with online discussion, be able to express opinions, and give extended reasoning in their class (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011).

Using the WeChat application for education purposes demonstrates the practicality of collaborative learning using social media. Wang (2016) provided a comparatively comprehensive picture of how WeChat supports language learning and suggests that its potential be further explored in an exploratory study. Zeng et al (2016) have research on using WeChat for medical teaching and it has shown that WeChat inspires students' curiosity and excitement in learning, develops their self-directed learning competence, improves collaboration with peers, and then encourages education transformation. Zhang (2016) carried out an empirical study on a WeChat-based flipped classroom and recognized that the model effectively improves the students' learning outcomes.

Past studies indicate social media platform has not scrutiny the necessary factors for effective integration of social media platform to maximize the benefits for language learning. WeChat has been used as a communication tool or as a social tool in teaching and learning for now. Social media creates a platform to enrich students' grammar skills as well as change their attitudes in reading and writing expressively (Arumugam et al., 2019).

Although social media has been available for many years, the usage of this technology in the ESL classroom has yet to be carried out effectively. As we are moving towards enhancing students' higher-order thinking skills, we should not limit our pedagogical practices only to the classroom. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) play an essential role in education. According to Malaysia's Ministry of Education's Policy on ICT in Education, the Smart School initiative has moved into wave 4, where technology should become an integral part of the nation's learning process (Arumugam et al., 2022; Frost & Sullivan, 2010). Therefore, social media can be one of the methods used by students to continue interaction outside the classroom boundary (Arumugam et al., 2019). Veerasingam (2020) advocates that the exchange outside the classroom via social media can also expand the online learning context for distance learning students.

Problem Statement

Many graduates lack English proficiency when applying language skills in the workplace (Lin et al., 2021; Yuen, 2015). They have to deal with many reading-related tasks, including reading reports, manuals, emails, minutes of meetings, agreements, instructions, and many more. Many can read and recognize the meaning of individual words in a report, for example, but are generally weak at understanding the content of the text. The questioning technique is an essential second language reading strategy as it helps readers locate specific information in the text by analyzing language cues. For many second-language learners of English, asking questions and solving problems creatively remain a problem.

Mugahed and Shahizan (2013) claimed that social media empowers the academic experience of the majority of the respondents. Shuhaida (2014) also shared the positive impact of ESL learners' collaborative writing groups via the Facebook platform. Geraldine (2013) and Arumugam et al.'s (2022) study recorded several benefits of the use of media tools for language learning and suggested the integration of multiple social media tools to enhance language learning. Although research has been done on social media for online learning, this has not expanded into second language learning. It, therefore, deserves further attention from researchers.

Moreover, these studies primarily focus on how students use the social media site for learning but do not focus much on effectively integrating social media into pedagogy from the curriculum-designing perspective. According to policies issued by the China State Council in 2002, "English should be offered in regions where favorable conditions exist," which indicates not all school students learn English in their secondary schools and colleges (Navin et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the globalization of the English language has brought attention to English education nationwide. Students and parents prefer the English language to the Chinese dialect when it comes to strengthening students' job opportunities or going abroad (Gregory, 2011). Thus, this study addresses the following research question:

What are the educational benefits of using WeChat as a social media platform for ESL learners?

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts the Community of Inquiry Framework, a constructivist approach to the online learning of a second language, to analyze the feasibility of improving students’ language skills through the social media platform using the WeChat application. The constructivist approach that indicates higher-order learning arises through the collaboration of three essential fundamental factors: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. The social media platform, designed specifically for communication and social interaction, is used as a tool to create an ESL learning environment for learners to improve their general reading skills and, at the same time, develop their critical thinking. Reading comprehension happens during the process of reading, processing, and understanding the meaning of a text. It occurs when the reader's expectations interact with the written material. Teaching reading comprehension is about developing the learners’ skill of generating thoughtful questions (Supramaniam & Arumugam, 2019; Lewin, 2010). Developing such questioning skills is achieved through the learners' active participation and involvement in social interactions in an environment that influences their thinking and knowledge construction one step at a time (Roya & Hanieh, 2015).

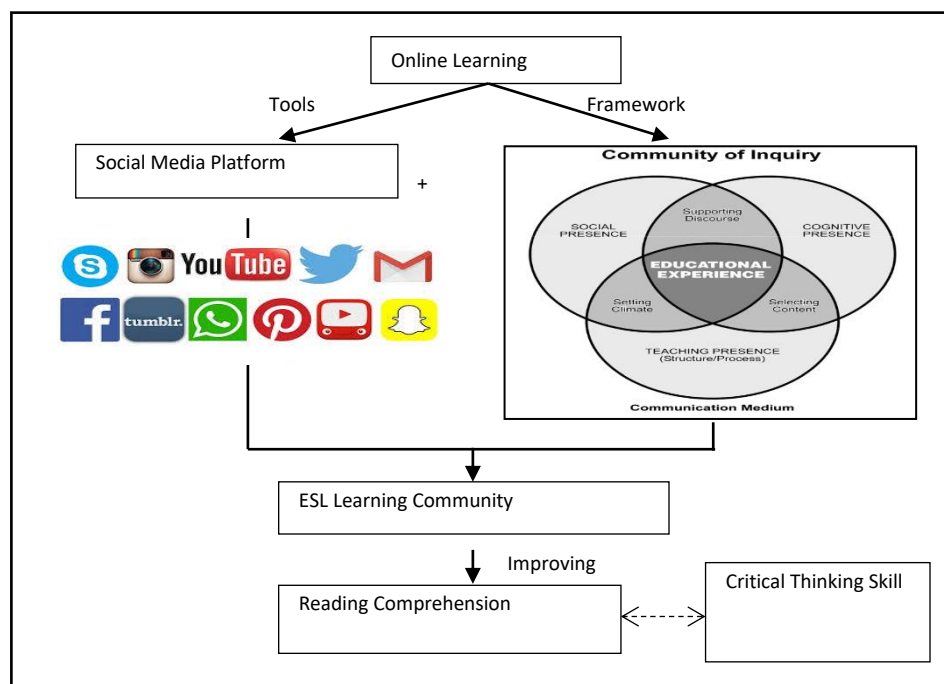


Figure 1: The schematic Diagram of the Study

Methodology

This study employs a survey design that involves numerical data collected from a WeChat group of ESL learners. Research data were collected using questionnaires and observation. A set of questionnaires was adapted from (Akyol and Garrison, 2008). The questionnaire consists of two parts; respondents’ perspectives and attitudes towards their experience in using WeChat for learning purposes and their information related to their experience in learning the English language. The questionnaire was distributed in mid-February 2017 to

the WeChat learning group, and respondents were given two months to respond. A few rounds of online questionnaire links were shared in the WeChat group inviting respondents to answer the online questionnaire. The questionnaire elicits learners' perspectives and attitudes toward using WeChat for learning purposes.

Besides the questionnaire, observations were done on how respondents interact with each other in the WeChat language learning group. Data collection was done within 3 months, from January to March 2020. Respondents to the interview provided additional information on how social media is used for language learning. The observation checklist was concluded and completed in the middle of March 2020.

Almost 300 ESL learners from the online community join this WeChat language, learning group. Respondents mainly were exit group and university students who have an interest in learning English as a second language. In the WeChat group, respondents were given a leeway to post a plain text message, picture message, or voice message to the whole group, and share a file or article with all the members. All the interactions were made in a public forum to obtain information about respondents' communication among themselves. Researchers observed all communications among respondents and facilitators, including their frequency of interaction.

Social media is available for users from any location around the world. This research was conducted among China online forum users. Respondents are active users invited from the Chinese SNS (Social Network Services) website in China, Douban's English learning interest group, baidu.com English Learning group, and WeChat ESL group official account members. This is a virtual community; thus, the location can be anywhere if the user proceeds with a WeChat account. But since the WeChat group invitation has been posted on China's forum site, most respondents are from China.

In this study, the researchers were the respondents in the WeChat group. The questionnaire was distributed to a language learning closed group named "First step" on the WeChat platform. The researcher enrolled 34 respondents. The online questionnaire was distributed to the WeChat ESL learners' group in mid-February 2020, and responses were collected within two months. The observation data collection started from the first session when the researcher joined the group until the end of the research with the study group.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

There were 65% female and 35% male respondents in this questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (85 %) were from the age groups of 25 to 34 and 35 to 44, who had completed their high school or middle-aged adults for continuous professional learning purposes. 55 % of the respondents admitted that they do not use 100% English in their communication, while 64 % agreed to code switch in their English language class. This seems to be the typical practice for language learning in China as it is desirable and functional. Arumugam et al (2019) indicated that code-switching is the instructional approach best fits the actual learning situation in China considering the students' low language competency.

Results and Discussion

Educational benefits of using WeChat as a social media platform for ESL Learners

Data from the questionnaire, observation, and interview are analyzed, transcribed, and presented to answer this question.

Most of the respondents used social media for language learning via multimedia. The analysis of questionnaires reveals that the usage of WeChat and WhatsApp communication applications for language learning among respondents revealed 45% and 40 % respectively. 70% of the respondents used YouTube to learn the English language. Other social media platforms were used for language learning besides the predefined options specified in the questionnaire: blogs and mobile applications such as language, grammar, translation, Tumblr, and Twitter.

Table 1

Social media applications used for language learning

Social media	%
WeChat	45
WhatsApp	40
Youku	6
YouTube	70
Facebook	62
Others (Specify)	27

Benefits of Social Media in Language Learning

The survey results were encouraging, and most respondents agreed that social media help improve their language skills, especially reading skills. As shown in Table 2, 65% of the respondents agreed that their reading skills have improved, while 50 % listening and writing skills respectively, and the least was 41 % for speaking skills. Only 3 % indicated they did not learn any language skills from social media. This result concurs with Arumugam, et al (2022) who claimed that social media is a crucial platform for ESL learners to enhance their language skills.

Table 2

Role of Social Media in English Language Learning Skills

Social media	%
Listening	50
Speaking	41
Reading	65
Writing	50
None	3

It was noted that a few active members shared and read short texts in the WeChat group almost daily. They also encouraged others to join the reading activities. Some were shy and unable to speak fluently in the English language, so they did not want to try it though there were members who practiced together frequently. This helped group members improve their speaking skills. Members communicated with each other in written English to practice their writing skills. This phenomenon aligns with some recent studies that social media

communication can improve writing skills (Arumugam et al., 2022; Gameel, 2016; Yunus & Salehi, 2012; Shih, 2011).

When members face challenges in communicating their ideas in a written message, they switch to their L1, the Chinese language. Conversely, if they did not know how to express some words in English, they asked other group members to translate the word into English. The translation and codeswitch have benefited them in improving their reading comprehension skill, as one of the primary abilities for reading comprehension is knowing the word's meaning. This is self-explanatory, as Arumugam et al. (2019) and Nagy (1988) stressed that it is arduous to understand a text without knowing what most of the words mean. In the same mindset, it is said that rich vocabulary is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension (Arumugam et al., 2020; Beck & McKeown, 2007).

In the interview, respondents agreed that sharing articles with other group members helped them improve their reading skills. Reading articles can help expose them to more vocabulary. From the interview session, the researchers learned that respondents also used the video tutorial to help them improve their listening skills. This feedback aligns with several studies indicating the use of video in ESL teaching and learning as an effective method (Arumugam et al., 2019; Nur & Jafre, 2011; Saci, 2013; Mohammad, 2016). Mohammad (2016) also suggested that YouTube can be a valuable tool through which multiple language skills can be taught including speaking, listening, and pronunciation skills. Also, respondents shared with the researcher that when group members try to communicate using the English language with other group members, they also improve their writing skills. The same finding is reflected in the questionnaire data.

Use of WeChat Social Media for Language Learning

As the WeChat group administrator only maintains the group's ground rules, no actual teacher exists. It was understandable that many did not see this learning group as having a teaching presence. However, the researcher perceived otherwise. Her opinion is similar to Dan and Mor (2014); Arumugam et al (2019) who mentioned in their research that teacher presence will cause students to behave accordingly concerning the style of writing and the way they express themselves about the contents learned. This WeChat group conversation does not only focus on language learning but also on other social communication, such as work or family-related information exchange.

With the group administrator's assistance in the group's administration task, 50% of the respondents agreed that they had communicated on essential course topics, goals, and time frames for learning activities. 45% of the respondents agreed that the group helped to keep respondents engaged in productive dialogue. On average, 41% of the respondents agreed that the group kept members on tasks that helped them learn.

The results show that only 27% of the respondents agreed that such a situation existed in the learning group. 32% of the respondents agreed there was a support that encouraged group members to explore new concepts and provide feedback that could help them understand their strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, 64% of the respondents said that guidance toward course topics could help clarify the respondent's thinking. There was less support in helping group members learn to identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

Undoubtedly, it is pretty low due to the absence of a teacher. Similarly, Chokri (2015); Shanthi (2019) advocated that the teacher's presence in the learning process is crucial for students to construct and share knowledge.

Only 27% of the respondents agreed that their WeChat discussion had focused on relevant issues that helped them to learn. In comparison, 23% agreed that there were actions that reinforced a sense of community among group members and activities that provided timely feedback. Quality interactions influence the development of a sense of community (Galea et al., 2012; Alfred, 2002), but as the controls were relatively loose in this WeChat group, the researcher agreed that it was a bit hard to reinforce a sense of community in this group. It was observed that sometimes the casual chats between group members were extremely long and not helpful for language learning.

Table 3

Teaching Presence of the WeChat learning group

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The instructor communicated essential course topics	5%	45%	41%	9%	0%
The instructor communicated important course goals	5%	55%	40%	0%	0%
The instructor communicated critical due dates/time frames for learning activities	5%	45%	45%	5%	0%
The instructor helped identify areas of agreement and disagreement on course topics that allowed me to learn	5%	22%	59%	9%	5%
The instructor helped guide the class toward understanding course topics in a way that helped me clarify my thinking	5%	31%	55%	9%	0%
The instructor helped to keep course respondents engaged and participating in productive dialogue	5%	41%	41%	13%	0%
The instructor helped keep the course respondents on task in a way that allowed me to learn	5%	36%	50%	9%	0%
The instructor encouraged course respondents to explore new concepts in this course	5%	27%	55%	13%	0%
Instructor actions reinforced the development of a sense of community among course respondents	5%	18%	55%	22%	0%

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The instructor helped to focus the discussion on relevant issues in a way that allowed me to learn	0%	27%	59%	14%	0%
The instructor provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses	5%	27%	41%	27%	0%
The instructor provided feedback in a timely fashion	5%	18%	59%	18%	0%

Many learners still perceive communication with teachers as crucial in an online learning community (Andrei et al., 2012). Some members who are good at English will help correct others' grammatical errors. They play the role of instructors in this WeChat group but are relatively loose, thus fewer impacting members' learning effectiveness. This was one of the issues raised by Garrison (2007) in his past research, where interaction and discourse play a key role in higher-order learning but not without structure (design) and leadership (facilitation and direction). The group administrator (one of the researchers) always ensured that members communicated in English and did not share unnecessary news in the group. This finding encouraged the group administrator to plan and execute collaborative activities with a sense of community and proper design and structure to achieve more educational benefits.

Social presence for educational purposes cannot be artificially separated from the purposeful nature of scholarly communication (i.e., cognitive and teaching presence). It may not be necessary to have a teacher here but it must be someone who will be responsible for creating quality interactions for inquiry. According to Garrison (2007), that is the purpose of social presence in an educational context. A study by Mugahed and Shahizan (2013) also suggested three predictors of using social media to improve students' academic performance through collaborative learning among students. They are as follows: interactivity with peers, interactivity with the teacher, and engagement.

According to Garrison (2007), cognitive presence is a cycle of practical inquiry where respondents move deliberately from understanding the problem or issue through to exploration, integration, and application. Table 4 shows how social media can help increase learners' creative thinking and problem-solving skill from a cognitive presence perspective. Results indicate that more than half of the respondents (58%) agreed problems posed increased their interest in course issues. 53% of the respondents felt motivated to explore content-related questions as the course activities piqued their curiosity. There was low agreement (37%) among respondents on utilizing various sources to explore problems posed in the group. Similarly, about 37% of the respondents agreed to brainstorm, and finding relevant information helped them resolve content-related questions.

A total of 58% of the respondents agreed that online discussions were valuable in helping them appreciate different perspectives, and they could use new information to solve their problems. There were also respondents (58%) who agreed that the reflection on course content and discussions helped them understand fundamental concepts in language learning

and were furthermore able to apply the knowledge created to their work or other non-class-related activities. Results indicated only 37% of the respondents could describe ways to test and apply the knowledge created in this course. It seems that respondents could use these ways but could not describe how to do it as results indicated that only 42% of the respondents had developed a solution to course problems that could be applied in practice. Although the results showed relatively low application ability, it did help some learners to improve their problem-solving skills after using the social media platform for learning. Christian and Georg (2012) shared in their study that learning how to solve problems in life occurs not in isolation but in communities or organizations. Thus, social interactions play a role in helping learners improve their problem-solving skills in this WeChat group. As Peter and Cynthia (1997) also shared in their study, through repeated read-aloud activities, the respondents may construct models of how intonation, pitch, and pacing affect comprehension and how one may problem-solve using text. Thus, social interactions and learning activities played a role in helping learners improve their problem-solving skills in this WeChat group.

53% of the respondents agreed that learning activities helped them construct explanations and solutions, and 47% of the respondents agreed they learned different ways of solving problems via interaction with members of the social media learning group. Most importantly, 58% of the respondents agreed they learned not to accept all arguments and conclusions but rather have an attitude involving questioning before making meaning. Critical thinking is about asking questions; it improves memory because we engage more closely with ideas (Ali & Kambiz, 2014). This finding confirmed that when members developed a questioning attitude, in a way, it also helped them improve their critical thinking skills as well.

Overall, the findings indicate that social media, like the WeChat platform, helps in language learning, especially reading comprehension skills. The activities in the group, such as sharing reading material, reading aloud practice, and writing social conversations, allow respondents to be more involved in the reading exercise. It was firstly about taking the input and understanding the meaning of the resources obtained before proceeding to the next step, which is to practice reading aloud or responding in a conversation (Katsumasa et al., 2017). Consequently, writing would also be improved as they would have to build a written response for the conversation. On occasions where some members help others to correct a grammatical mistake, respondents get to improve their grammatical accuracy as well. Respondents who used video materials would also get to improve their listening while watching the video tutorial. When practicing reading aloud or speaking with correct pronunciation, there is a tendency for their pronunciation to improve simultaneously. In the same mindset, it is said that reading aloud may allow the students to construct mental structures or models that relate both to the reading process and the content (Peter & Cynthia, 1997).

With social media interaction, respondents can improve their critical thinking skills when solving problems and making meaning of the information they learn within the group. More setting is required to enhance further efficiency in improving learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, such as including more collaborative tasks in the interaction. This has been indicated in a study by Tan et al (2015), where the survey results and feedback from

the students indicate that in the course of completing the authentic task, students were able to develop necessary higher-order thinking skills. In addition, while reading, especially reading comprehension skills, improve, critical thinking skills will also improve (Abdulmohsen, 2012).

Through the questionnaire results of this study, the researcher identified the educational benefits of the social media platform for second language learning. The researcher joined the WeChat learning group under investigation to find the help of social media platforms for ESL but also did not limit feedback only to a particular platform. This has broadened the researcher's view of other social media that could provide ESL learners with educational benefits, such as how the respondents used YouTube in the interview.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the influence of social media platforms on English as a second language learning through data collected from a WeChat group of ESL learners. Using the Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) framework to identify teaching, social and cognitive presence in the online learning community, the researcher aims to examine if ESL learners can enhance their critical thinking skills when improving language skills. The data were attained by completing a questionnaire, the researcher's observation of how the WeChat space has been used for learning, and the interview of respondents on how they use social media for learning.

WeChat as a Social Platform

WeChat has been widely used as a social platform due to its ease of use, versatile features, and robust sharing capability. The group chat feature allows respondents to engage in various social activities such as discussion, sharing resources, and seeking opinions conveniently. A variety of stickers and emoticons, audio and text chat integrated into one interface, and a quick share of resources have relaxed respondents while using the environment for social interaction. Respondents in the WeChat group are active and engage in group discussion. As a famous social media platform, its social presence can be quickly established in the WeChat environment (Wang et al., 2016).

Implications

This research provides important information on students using WeChat for ESL learning intentions. For teachers, it is to be noted that students prefer their presence in an online learning community. They need a teacher to guide them and provide helpful learning feedback. According to the community inquiry framework, teaching presence is essential for planning and executing collaborative activities. ESL teachers can have more reference sources to consider when they design curricula. Using social media provides students with an enriched learning experience.

For the student, consideration for other respondents' time is vital when being online in group chats. Minimizing not course-related conversations will reduce students' time in reading unnecessary chat logs and take up less storage space on their smartphones. Comments unrelated to everyone in the group can be restricted to personal chats rather than involving one in reading them, which may lead to the growth of undesirable feelings among members.

For the educational institution, the latest social media trend used in education should be considered when designing a curriculum. This study also informed that utilizing a constructivist framework in designing student-centered online learning courses for graduates or exit group students can offer many educational benefits to the ESL language learning context.

Recommendations

This research has employed a survey design to collect data on how ELS learners think and feel about social media for language learning. As this study only concentrated on a small sample of online communities in China, future studies on the use of social media for language learning should cover a broader segment of the population. Perhaps future studies could include a more collaborative task for the online learning group to investigate the impact further or fully adapt to the community of inquiry framework.

Although this research involves interviewing respondents for data collection, only a few questionnaire respondents could be selected for the interview due to time constraints. This may still not offer an in-depth understanding of the impact of social media on language learning and explains why the researcher proposes more studies to be carried out on collaborative learning in the future.

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