

Analysing the Potential of Social Networking Sites on EFL Learners' Vocabulary Mastery: A Situated-learning Approach

Elham Nikbakht

English Department, Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran

Abbas Mehrabi Boshrabadi

English Department, Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract—To what extent is the appearance of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), from the increased use of technology-supported online interactions, influencing EFL learners' vocabulary learning process? Answering this question is the main objective of the present study. Without a doubt, with the advent of computer-mediated learning technologies, today's students have been provided with more adjustable approaches in foreign language learning. Accordingly, the present study aimed at exploring the educational benefits of using Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook in the development of Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. Following a pretest-posttest design, the participants of experimental and control groups, who were 100 EFL learners from Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan (Isfahan), Iran, were compared regarding the level of their vocabulary knowledge. The findings pointed to the positive role of SNSs, as an instructional tool, in enhancing students' level of second language (L2) lexical knowledge by allowing the retention of new words in an interactional environment. Finally, as a post hoc analysis, a questionnaire was administered to the participants of experimental group so as to gauge their opinions towards the effectiveness of using such SNSs in the process of L2 vocabulary learning.

Index Terms—social networking sites, lexical knowledge, facebook, technology-mediated learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Indubitably, current dramatic improvements in technology-mediated educational settings have changed the teaching methodology in every field of study, and the field of language teaching is by no means an exception. Considering the significance of technology-mediated learning approaches, Jonassen, Howland, Marra, and Crismond (2008) assert that "Technologies support meaningful learning when they fulfill a learning need, when interactions with technologies are learner-initiated and learner-controlled and when interactions with the technologies are conceptually and intellectually engaging" (p. 7). Moreover, as Kumar and Lightner (2007) point out, today's students must be provided with the modern facilities to which they are accustomed in order for them to get deeply involved in the learning process.

Online foreign language learning, on the other hand, has recently been regarded with favour by many learners as a result of a growth in the global computer networks. Nowadays, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter are believed to play a significant role in developing a foreign language in an interactive and dynamic context. Due to the rapid progression of such learning platforms, the learners are now provided with new opportunities by accessing such dynamic contexts in order to promote their learning processes. In this regard, Harrison and Thomas (2009) maintain that learning a foreign/second language in such social settings may occur unconsciously when, for example, users develop and share their profiles with their friends or provide others with comments.

Consequently, many language researchers (e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997; Johnson, 2004; Mills, 2011) have acknowledged a paradigm shift in the way second/foreign languages are taught. They all believe that foreign language teaching methodology is now moving from a cognitive orientation to a social orientation and from classroom contexts to naturalistic settings. Considering this fact, some of the practitioners (e.g., Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Lim, 2012) highlight the fact that traditional classrooms are not as efficient as such online dynamic and natural environments, and that SNSs have offered an opportunity for EFL learners in order to improve their overall language proficiency. The main reason is that these dynamic learning environments, compared to traditional classrooms with blackboard, are in line with the EFL learners' interests and tendencies, which will in turn increase their motivations. Thorne, Black, and Sykes (2009) and Ziegler (2007) also support this issue and contend that social networking tools have been praised for their educational values and potentials and are heralded for their capacities in boosting students' motivations and encouraging their engagements.

However, the most important role of social networking tools is to deepen the underlying assumption of group activity in the process of language learning. Focusing on this view, in 1991, Lave and Wenger demonstrated their explanatory model of *situated learning*. By this, Lave and Wenger rightly believed that learning takes place as long as EFL/ESL

learners are situated in the *Communities of Practice* (COP). As noted by Wenger (1998), COP is defined as a group of people who interact with each other regularly with particular goals through what is called social interaction. Lave and Wenger further argue that learners incorporate into COP by active participation in order to foster their knowledge and improve their skills. Along the same line, Heeter (2005) explains that the purpose of situated learning is to encourage and motivate learners by paralleling the learning tasks with real world situations. It will provide a real world context for learners and make a progress in students' learning by highlighting the use of knowledge in that context. Heeter further states that in Situated Learning Theory, learners are involved in the social context with the aim of fostering, understanding, and improving their learning in an authentic situation.

Interestingly, the other widely acknowledged benefit of using SNSs in educational domains is the ability of individual learners in exchanging their language skills and sharing their language knowledge by participating in such authentic learning platforms. Yet, the majority of EFL classrooms are suffering from the lack of necessary characteristics of these interactive learning environments where learners can be engaged in a dynamic interaction so as to utilize and practice English for various authentic purposes (Murand & Norizan, 2012).

One of the most favored SNSs is a social platform known as Facebook. Evidently, Facebook, as a useful tool designed for social interactions, has also been recognized as a pedagogical tool for EFL/ESL learners in order to exchange and share their linguistic repertoire. In this regard, Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison and Wash (2011) comment that Facebook users may actively engage in sharing and exchanging their language abilities, which is sometimes conscious and at other times an unconscious process. In so doing, users can simply make a profile for themselves and then discuss their ideas and practice the target language with their peers or even instructors. Focusing on the potentials of using such SNSs in language learning process, Hayashi (2011) and Majid, Stapa, and Keong (2012) also point out that by using such platforms, learners would be able to identify the language setting, interact in a variety of groups, post or update the status, or have an online chat coincidentally in an enthusiastic and enjoyable way. Incidentally, this learner-learner or learner-instructor cyber communications would reconstruct a new collaborating environment in which both parties can benefit from enhancing their language abilities and skills such as speaking, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

Obviously, a wide number of studies have been conducted on the impact of SNSs on learning a given foreign language and, as a consequence, lots of information has been released regarding the relationship existing between these SNSs and language learning development (e.g., Lantof, 2000; Ellis, 2005; Heeter, 2005; Boyd & Ellison, 2011; Norizan, Murad & Zulkifli, 2013). However, no writer has been able to conduct any structured research in order to explore the possible impact of SNSs such as Facebook on students' level of L2 lexical knowledge. Clearly, lexical acquisition in social communicative environments is a critical stage in a way that L2 learners can learn a set of new words in the target language and get wise to the relationship between the words and their meanings. This is particularly important because the role of lexical knowledge in learners' overall linguistic knowledge takes precedence over any other linguistic aspects. In this regard, Gass (1988) maintains that the importance of lexical knowledge is stressed by the fact that grammatical errors may result in understandable structures, but vocabulary errors will definitely disrupt the communication.

The superiority of teaching lexical items in the cyber-communication environments over traditional classroom-based methods has recently been acknowledged in a number of studies (e.g., Tokac, 2005; Kilickaya & Krajka, 2010; Lin, Hsiao, Tseng, & Chan, 2014). Kilickaya and Krajka (2010), for instance, made an attempt to explore the possible differences existing between online vocabulary teaching methods and traditional methods. The results revealed that the participants who experienced online vocabulary learning process (experimental group) exhibited a better performance compared to those who were taught the same lexical items through traditional classroom-based instructions (control group). It was finally concluded that the participants of experimental group could remember the lexical categories more efficiently than participants of control group due to the fact that they had learned the words in an authentic context and were exposed to each vocabulary item repeatedly. In the same vein, in 2014, Lin, Hsiao, Tseng, and Chan conducted a study in which the participants, using hardware devices and all-in-one touch screen desktop serving as a platform for collaborative learning, were required to accomplish the pre-activities such as matching, scrambled sentences, and translation. After examining their level of lexical knowledge using an immediate and delayed posttest, the researchers concluded that collaborative learning of vocabulary in the technology-supported classrooms would result in the students' deep processing learning and retaining of unfamiliar words in the long-term memory.

Considering the above, this paper was an attempt to investigate the usefulness of SNSs such as Facebook in enhancing Iranian EFL learners' lexical knowledge and challenges they may face while practicing with such communication tools. The logic behind choosing Facebook from among other SNSs relies on the fact that Facebook has become a well-known communicative tool for people in order to interact with each other. Another reason in selecting Facebook is that Facebook is considered as a dynamic framework for EFL/ESL learners in order to develop and foster their overall language proficiency in general and their vocabulary knowledge in particular. Consequently, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do SNSs have an impact on the development of lexical knowledge of Iranian EFL learners?
2. What is the personal attitude of EFL learners towards learning vocabulary through SNSs?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the impact of SNSs on the Iranian EFL Learners' level of L2 lexical knowledge. To this end, an initial sample of 150 students was randomly selected from the population of MA students from Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan (Isfahan), Isfahan, Iran. The participants were both male and female, all of which native speakers of Persian beginning the second term of their MA in Applied Linguistics. Then, a sample Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered so as to choose from among them the homogenized participants. Consequently, the final 100 students were selected and considered as the target sample. It should be noted that the participants were all approximately in the same age range; i.e., between 21 and 23. Finally, using the Nation's (2001) Vocabulary Level Test, the selected sample was divided into two identical groups (experimental and control) regarding the level of their L2 vocabulary knowledge.

B. Instruments

To reach the purpose of the study, three main instruments were employed, viz, two Nation's (2001) Vocabulary Level Test (NVLT), and a researcher-developed questionnaire. To measure the participants' vocabulary proficiency size, a sample of NVLT, serving as the pretest, was administered in which the participants were required to answer 30 multiple-choice vocabulary questions. Another sample of NVLT, which was considered as the posttest, was also used to check the possible effect of the treatment; i.e., the potential of using SNSs on students' vocabulary knowledge. Finally, to gauge the students' overall experience and opinion towards the efficacy of using SNSs in the way they learn new words in the target language, a well-organized questionnaire, as a sort of post hoc analysis, was administered to the participants of the treatment group.

C. Procedures

After selecting the final 100 students who were all at the same level of overall language proficiency, a sample of NVLT, serving as the pretest, was administered in order to determine their level of L2 vocabulary knowledge. The logic behind choosing the NVLT was that the validity of the test had already been estimated by many practitioners and claimed to be high. Using KR-21 method, the reliability of the test was also calculated, which was equal to 0.78. The test contained 30 multiple-choice items, which the participants were required to answer in 15 minutes. The main criterion determined for the students' final scores was their percentages of right answers. Based on their scores obtained from the pretest, 100 participants were ultimately selected for instructional sessions and posttest. The participants were then divided into the experimental and control group.

Both control and experimental groups were provided with the target 20 lexical items, but with different instructional procedures. The words under investigation were all taken from a passage in one of the social networks. The treatment material also incorporated such activities as matching, crossword and word search puzzles for both groups. However, what was different for experimental group was the presentation environment of the vocabulary items. In fact, for the experimental group, participants were taught the target vocabulary in a computer-supported classroom in which students were able to rehearse the lexical items interactively using a social networking site known as Facebook.

On the other hand, the control group was provided with the same target words using the same traditional instruction and activities as treatment group in order to ensure parallelism between both groups. However, they were not engaged in the dynamic and social environment to practice the learned lexical items. After each session, the teachers checked the participants' answers and made any necessary correction. During the whole instructional period, the participants of experimental group were given the necessary guidelines in order to engage properly in such online social environments. Finally, after a period of five weeks, another sample of NVLT was administered to the participants to check the possible differences existing between the two groups regarding their vocabulary learning process and the extent to which each group has retained the target words.

Moreover, in order to evaluate the participants' attitudes towards the efficacy of using Facebook in the development of their lexical knowledge, the researchers supplied the participants of experimental group with a questionnaire. The questions were all multiple choice, based on the Likert Scale (i.e., completely agree, agree, not sure, disagree, completely disagree). It should be noted that the validity and reliability of the questionnaire was acknowledged by some of the practitioners of the field.

III. RESULTS

To come up with an answer to the first research question, t-test was conducted two times; once prior to the commencement of the experiment, and once after the implementation of the experiment. The first t-test was run to compare the vocabulary knowledge of the participants in both experimental and control groups and to ensure their homogeneity regarding their level of L2 lexical knowledge prior to the experiment. The results of this t-test analysis are depicted in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR COMPARING THE PRETEST SCORES OF CONTROL GROUP (CG) AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (EG)

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	CG	50	12.3400	2.59992	.36768
	EG	50	12.9000	2.75718	.38992

In Table 1, the number of participants in each group, mean scores, and standard deviations are displayed. The Experimental Group (EG) managed to obtain a higher mean score ($M = 12.90$, $SD 2.75$) than the Control Group (CG) ($M = 12.34$, $SD = 2.59$). However, whether this difference is statistically significant should be determined in the t-test table.

TABLE 2.
T-TEST RESULTS FOR COMPARING THE PRETEST SCORES OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.346	.558	-1.045	98	.299	-.56000	.53594	-1.62356	.50356
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.045	97.664	.299	-.56000	.53594	-1.62360	.50360

Since the Sig. (2-tailed) value in this table is greater than the level of significance ($.299 > .05$), it would be concluded that there is no significant difference between the pretest scores of the two groups. This means that these groups were homogeneous in terms of their vocabulary knowledge at the outset of the study.

Another t-test was also conducted to compare the performances of the two groups on the posttest. The results of this end-of-the-experiment analysis are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the analysis.

TABLE 3.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR COMPARING THE POSTTEST SCORES OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	EG	50	20.7600	2.42066	.34233
	CG	50	18.3000	2.20621	.31200

On the posttest, the EG once again obtained a higher mean score ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 2.42$) than did the CG ($M = 18.30$, $SD = 2.20$). To find out the possible significance of this difference in the mean scores, the p value under the Sig. (2-tailed) column in the t-test table should be checked.

TABLE 4.
T-TEST RESULTS FOR COMPARING THE POSTTEST SCORES OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL GROUPS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	.355	.553	5.311	98	.000	2.46000	.46318	1.54083	3.37917
	Equal variances not assumed			5.311	97.169	.000	2.46000	.46318	1.54073	3.37927

The p value here is less than the significance level ($.000 < .05$), indicating that the differences between the two groups on the posttest scores were indeed statistically significant. As a result, it could be inferred that SNSs were more effective than traditional methods of instruction for teaching vocabulary to Iranian EFL learners.

In an attempt to find an answer to the second research question, the answers to the items of the questionnaire were analyzed. The questionnaire, with the frequencies of responses to each choice, is reproduced as Table 5 here. In order to analyze the questionnaire data, the average of the five values of the Likert scale questionnaire was calculated ($5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 15$; $15 / 5 = 3$) and determined to be 3. Then for each item in the questionnaire, the average of the responses was calculated (the frequencies for each response were multiplied by the related value of the response; the numbered

were then added up and subsequently divided by the total number of the participants). The mean response, then, was compared with the average value (i.e. 3). In case where the mean response was greater than 3, it could be argued that the participants gave more concurring responses. The greater the mean response than 3, the more affirmative the participants' responses to the questions were. Conversely, values under 3 would indicate that the participants responded negatively to the questions.

TABLE 5.
FREQUENCIES OF RESPONSES AND THE MEAN RESPONSE IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions	Completely Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Not Sure (3)	Disagree (2)	Completely Disagree (1)	Mean Response
1. Do you believe in learning vocabulary via SNSs?	*59	21	11	7	2	4.28
2. Do you agree that learning vocabulary through SNSs is more enjoyable and profitable?	*63	18	5	9	5	4.65
3. Do you make faster progress in L2 vocabulary learning by means of SNSs?	17	*43	27	12	1	3.63
4. Do you think that learning vocabulary in dynamic environments is an adequate strategy in foreign language classes?	18	*39	13	16	14	3.31
5. Do you agree that learning L2 vocabulary through only traditional classroom-based instruction is not sufficient anymore?	16	21	*29	16	18	2.99
6. Do you think that SNSs such as Facebook have a negative effect on your vocabulary learning process?	9	13	21	*42	15	2.59
7. Do you comprehend the meaning of L2 vocabulary easier via SNSs than traditional strategies?	*44	24	19	13	0	3.99
8. Do you support the idea that by learning L2 vocabulary through traditional instructions you are under lots of pressure and stress?	25	*37	10	19	9	3.50
9. Do you agree that by learning L2 vocabulary through SNSs you will be able to retain the words in your long-term memory more efficiently?	*33	28	24	13	2	3.67
10. Do you confirm that collaborative learning in authentic environments foster and improve your L2 vocabulary learning?	42	*58	0	0	0	4.42
11. Do you agree that today most students tend to attend in technology-supported classes?	*43	36	18	3	0	4.16
12. Do you acknowledge that repetitive exposure to the target words in the SNSs especially Facebook improve the quality of your vocabulary and communication?	*32	23	6	18	21	3.45

* The choice receiving the most number of responses in each item

In terms of the first question, the mean response is 4.28 (which is greater than 3), indicating that the participants mostly gave an affirmative response to the first question which asked whether they agreed with learning vocabulary via SNSs. Another piece of evidence for this finding is the frequency of responses to the Completely Agree response (that is, 59). Likewise, most of the students gave positive responses to the second question ($f_{\text{completely agree}} = 63$, $M = 4.65$) which probed whether learning vocabulary through SNSs was enjoyable and profitable. The mean response to the third question also exceeded 3 ($M = 3.63$). This question asked whether the participants made faster progress via SNSs and 43 participants marked Agree.

The next question (question 4) aimed at finding out whether vocabulary learning in dynamic environments was sufficient or not. Thirty-nine learners checked the Agree response and the mean response for this item was calculated to be 3.31. In the fifth question, which asked whether traditional methods of vocabulary learning were insufficient, most of the participants marked the Not Sure choice, and the mean response turned out to be 2.99. To question 6, most of the responses (42%) were Disagree. This question asked whether SNSs had negative effects on vocabulary learning. Question 7 related to the ease of vocabulary learning via SNSs compared to traditional methods, and 44% of the participants completely agreed that vocabulary learning via SNSs was easier ($M = 3.99$).

The next question (question 8) asked whether the traditional way of learning entails a lot of pressure and stress, and more than one thirds of the respondents (37%) agreed ($M = 3.50$). Most of the responses to the 9th question (33%) were of those who completely agreed that vocabulary learning via SNSs took place more efficiently and quickly. The Agree response of Question 10 was selected by most (58%) of the respondents. This question aimed to explore the participants' opinion regarding whether learning in authentic environments fostered L2 vocabulary development or not. The penultimate question was about the tendency of the EFL learners to learn in technology-supported environments and most (43%) of the learners marked their tendency to do so by choosing the Completely Agree response. Finally, Thirty-two percent of the participants completely agreed that continued exposure to SNSs would bring about improvements in their vocabulary knowledge and communication skills. The mean response for this question was 4.42.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A strong positive relationship between the computer-mediated vocabulary instruction and learners' level of L2 lexical knowledge has always been reported in the literature. However, in reviewing the literature, no research has been found to be conducted on the association between SNSs such as Facebook and vocabulary learning process. Accordingly, this study set out with the aim of assessing the effectiveness of SNSs such as Facebook on the development of Iranian EFL learners' lexical knowledge.

Considering the first research question, it was hypothesized that SNSs such as Facebook do play a positive role on the way students retain their L2 lexical items. To investigate the first question, an independent-samples T-Test was conducted on the participants' posttest scores. The results revealed that the participants of experimental group outperformed those of control group regarding the extent to which they learned the target lexical items, indicating that SNSs did have a positive effect on the students' level of L2 vocabulary knowledge. This finding is consistent with the findings of Nakata (2008) and Fehr et al. (2012) who found that students who were rehearsing the instructed lexical items in a computer-based environment using online social platforms had a chance to retain more vocabulary items and, as a result, their size of vocabulary knowledge was enhanced. One possible explanation for the efficiency of SNSs would then be the repeated exposure of learners to the target words during their interactions in these social environments. However, with the small sample size of this study, caution must be applied as the findings might not be extrapolated to all EFL learners or to all types of instructions.

Following the experimental phase of the study, an attempt was also made to gauge the learners' opinions and attitudes towards the effectiveness of SNSs in the process of L2 vocabulary learning. As such, the participants of experimental group were provided with a questionnaire comprising of 12 items. Overall, the results of the questionnaire analysis indicated that most participants believed that learning L2 (in this case, English) lexical items in an online environment would have a positive effect on their vocabulary retention process. The means of students' answers to the items supported the fact that SNSs would be considered as a useful communicative tool in which EFL learners can practice the target language lexical items. Such social platforms, then, would facilitate the L2 vocabulary learning process. The main reason is that students would be able to retain the words in their long-term memories more efficiently due to the fact that they are repeatedly rehearsing them.

It is worth mentioning here that despite the fact that the findings of the present study supported the idea of the usefulness of SNSs in improving the vocabulary knowledge of EFL learners, the generalizability of the results may be challenged due to some limitations experienced in this study. As an example, to determine the effectiveness of the treatment, such short period of time (five weeks) might not be appropriate enough. Another limitation has something to do with the validity of the NVLT in that such test may not measure the intended vocabulary properly.

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Elham Nikbakht is currently studying English Translation in M.A level at Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran. She has been teaching English as a foreign language since fall 2010 in a number of language institutes in Iran. Her research focuses are technology-supported language learning and second language acquisition. She has published a number of papers including “The Relationship between Multiple Intelligences and Iranian EFL Learners’ Level of L2 Lexical Knowledge: The Case of Gender” and “Critical Evaluation of Lexical Categories in ESP Textbooks Used for Iranian Dentistry Students: The Gap between Perceived and Real Needs”.

Abbas Mehrabi Boshrabadi is holding an M.A degree in Applied Linguistics from Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran. He has seven years of experience teaching IELTS, TOEFL, and Academic Writing. His main research interests are CALL, discourse analysis, and second language learning, he has published several articles in these areas including “The Relationship between Multiple Intelligences and Iranian EFL Learners’ Level of L2 Lexical Knowledge: The Case of Gender”, “A Cross Cultural Analysis of Textual and Interpersonal Metadiscourse Markers: The Case of Economic Articles in English and Persian Newspapers”, “A Contrastive Analysis of Links of Textuality in Abstracts Written by Persian and English Writers in Clinical Psychology Journals” and etc.