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SECTION 24. Sociological research.

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES: ORAL PERFORMANCE OF EFL LEARNERS

Abstract: Social Networks are Web-based services that allow people to construct a public, or somewhat public, profile. Social networking can sometimes result in negative outcomes, some with long-term consequences. There are millions of people on the internet who are looking to meet other people and to gather and share information and experiences on a variety of topics. The growing popularity of social networking sites (SNS) among the Internet users demands an introspection of personal and social behavior of human beings. The present study was set out to investigate the effect of social hubs on improving EFL learners' speaking skill. The participants of the study were 42 female students between the age of 17 and 25. They were randomly assigned to two groups of experimental and control. Each group consisted of 21 participants. An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and the pre-test were administered to both groups at the beginning of the study. The treatment lasted 4 weeks and it was held in a private institute in Rasht, Iran. The experimental group was allowed and encouraged to use social channels in addition to the traditional class activities. Further, a course of communication on social networks was administered to the experimental group while the control group attended the traditional regular classes and they were not allowed to use computers for communication. In the end, the post-test was administered to both groups. The findings displayed that social networking had a positive impact on speaking ability of Iranian EFL students.

Key words: Speaking ability, Social channels, Social Networking Service, EFL Learners.

Language: English

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Introduction

The intensification of the internet age has enabled us to live a life at a faster hop. The younger section of society like children, pre-teens and teens accounts for a very large portion of the internet populace. Online Social networking is a type of virtual communication that allows people to connect with each other. This concept arises from basic need of human beings to stay together in groups forming a community. Innovative and pedagogically effective ways to improve language learning include instructional uses, students' perceived learning gains, instructors' use of the technology, social impact and economic viability for use by the students (Facer & Abdous, 2011).

Online Social Networking

Boothby (2006:1) argues that today's knowledge worker can work efficiently in large virtual teams,

and social networking sites create such an electronic platform. Wenger (2004:2) and Bryan, Matson and Weiss (2007) concur and add that groups of people, who interact regularly, such as virtual teams, are bound to improve their skills through knowledge sharing. Therefore, notice should be taken to knowledge workers of today who not only function efficiently in large virtual teams, but thrive in such an environment to an extent where they advance their knowledge sharing skills. If knowledge sharing can be increased by a virtual CoP, then social networking sites may prove to be the catalyst to promote interaction (Boyd and Ellison, 2007:211; Ryberg and Larsen, 2008:103-115). Considering the potential of virtual teams interacting within a CoP by utilizing the OSN platform, the effect may be an increase in productivity of those employees who actively search and employ their list of contacts as well as others' linked-in profiles and their contacts and by updating and growing their own list of contacts. If these 'connected individuals' spend time interacting with

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other individuals who possess knowledge about the relevant working environment, increased knowledge sharing is likely to take place.

Positive Effects of Social Networking

We can access information in better way. People who have a childhood and pubescent life minus the internet are faced with the difficulty of getting access to vital information and knowledge they need for education. This means that when you need to do research on something, you have to spend tons of effort and go miles in order to find books, periodicals, and other paper sources just to get started. Additionally, you may also need to conduct interviews and surveys so as to get more information about a certain issue you're tackling. But with the birth of the internet, every single bit of information or knowledge a child or teen needs to learn is compiled in a very large library called the World Wide Web. With social networking, research is a thousand times easier and getting the information you want may be done in minutes. Social networking provides interactive involvement with other peoples. Social networks function in the online environment through social networking sites, that is, technology that allows people to set up profiles, link to other individuals' profiles and view, navigate and interact with others in the social network. Lange (2008:361) views the linking of profiles together with the ability to view the resulting connections on others' profiles as the most tangible mechanisms reflecting existing social networks. Boyd and Ellison (2007:211) add that this technology allows people to articulate their relationship to others in a way that is visible to anyone who can access their profile. Being linked or connected to others can lead to potential benefits such as improved collaboration and information sharing, greater productivity and enhanced communications among coworkers, business partners and customers. In this environment, individuals know who knows who, what each member is currently involved in and how they can be reached. In short, OSN provides a simpler and more intuitive approach for members of the same community of employees to find each other based on complementary knowledge or need for knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

In Iran as most of the policy makers' focus is on the regular classroom activities, they have ignored the role of students' activities at home and environment. Students are making a huge revolution to become a member of a social network in order to communicate with others. As the students communicate through social networking, they make progress in many abilities. Further, the social networking in the near future might become the main

channel to communicate for most of the people all over the world. Moreover, education and training through the Internet is becoming more obvious and common in the world. In many developing countries as well as in Iran, colleges are being interested in online training. They attempt to absorb pupils to use the Internet to perform their training process. The academic institutions need to devise appropriate policies and strategies on how they can utilize social networking sites to support education and learning beyond the classroom. Rubin (1987) believed that communication strategies are less directly related to the learning of language and are used more for the aim of communicating; therefore, they are not listed under learning strategies in her classification. Hence, there is the need to fashion out some means of selecting and using the right social networking site responsibly. This study is concerned with the trend of use of the sites, what benefits students derive from using the sites, the dangers associated with them and ways to avert such dangers. Despite assumption that the lecture is cohesive and consistent to all attendance, exchanging ideas, sharing knowledge, and expanding understanding is very required outside the classroom boundaries. Here, the part of sharing and cooperating activities among students and between students and the lecturers appear to be very urgent. From this point, social networking sites appear very helpful in building academic groups to achieve better academic learning and communication. It is then, the purpose of this study to provide a better understanding of how students are investing their skills, time, and willingness in using their Social Networking (SN) sites for better academic achievements and to examine factors affecting their use.

Research Question

Based on the above mentioned problem, the researchers tried to answer the following question:

RQ: Does social networking have any effect on the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted with the participation of the students from a private institute in Rasht, Iran. There were 21 female students in each of the experimental and control groups; they ranged in age from 17 to 25. The sample of this study was chosen from among 62 private institute EFL students. The institute was chosen because it is equipped with many facilities, such as language labs and internet access. To provide at least half of the students with the Internet is one of the vital requirements for conducting the present study. Among the whole

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population of the experiment, those who obtained one standard deviation below and above the mean were selected. 42 students had the criteria to participate in the study. In order to divide students into the experimental and control groups, the computer randomized procedure was employed. According to the process of randomization, 21 students were chosen to be in the experimental group and the rest were the control group.

Instrumentation

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

This test was administered to determine the language proficiency level of the participants and classify them into the sample. This test consisted of 60 items which was developed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. OPT test was used to specify the sample of the experiment among 62 available students in the private institute in Rasht.

IELTS Speaking Test

The sample IELTS speaking test from the book 'prepare for IELTS' written by Cameron and Todd (2005) was used. This test was considered as pretest and post test of the study.

Treatment

In order to investigate the effect of social networking on speaking ability of the students, the researcher made a forum in WWW.Google.com sites. And asked the participants of experimental group to sign up there and became a member of it. The duration of treatment was lasted for three months. In fact two weeks (6 session) for 30 minutes in every session, participants join to the forum and

communicate there with their classmates. They discussed together and shared the information. Every session they had a specific topic. Moreover, they were instructed by traditional methods of class too. The control group did not receive any treatment. The participants learnt the lessons through traditional method of teaching.

Procedure

In order to determine the role of social hubs on the speaking ability of students, Oxford Placement Test was administered among 62 EFL learners out of whom those whose scores were between one SD below and above the mean were selected for the study. The participants were assigned in to two groups randomly. After the pre-test, learners received the instruction based on the materials covered in the class. There wasn't any control on the gender. Their age was ranged from 17 to 25. Then the pretest of speaking from the book" prepare for IELTS' written by Cameron and Todd (2005) was used. This test was repeated for the post test of the study too. For three months experimental group participate in the forum and tried to communicate base on specific topic for every sessions. It took 30 minutes for every session. And the control group did not receive any kind of treatment. They were followed traditional method of teaching in class. At last the post test of ILETS Speaking was administered in order to observe the differences and developments.

Results

In order to have homogenized participants in terms of their general English language proficiency, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. The descriptive statistics for the OPT test are displayed in following table.

Table1

Descriptive Statistic for OPT Test.

N	Mean	Median	Std	Variance	Min	Max	Max
Valid	61.315	62.000	9.6304	144.257	35.00	91.00	38.00
Missing	0						

Out of 65 participants, 42 were considered as homogenous members based on one SD above and one SD below the mean. Figure 1 below shows the histogram for the OPT test. Before working on the

research question, it should be mentioned that the speaking test section was rated using two raters holding M.A. in TEFL. Table 2 below shows the inter-rater reliability.

Table2

Inter-rater reliability Between the Two Scores.

Cronbach 's Alpha	Cronbach 's Alpha Based on Standardized Item	N of Items
.785	.818	2

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As it can be seen in table(2), the inter-rater reliability index is .785 which shows high reliability between two scorers. In order to answer the question of the study, an independent sample test was run to compare the scores of students in the experimental and control group. The data revealed that there was

no significant difference between the speaking ability of the two groups.

Table (3) shows the descriptive analysis for the pretest and posttest of general English in the experimental group of the study:

Table3

Descriptive results of the experimental group of the study.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	21	15.2343	1.52120	0.40024
Post-test	21	17.6011	1.02150	0.34773

As it is indicated in table (3) the number of participants has been 30 in each experiment (N=21). There has been no missing value which shows all selected students took part in the experiments of the study. The mean for the pretest scores of general English exam in the experimental group was shown to be 15.2343, as compared to the mean for posttest scores in the same group which was 17.6011. As for the standard deviations obtained for the experimental group, there seems to be more variability among the

pretest scores than the posttest. This confirms that group work learning led to better achievement and was effective in better learning. This may demonstrate the participant's posttest scores are more homogenous after conducting the treatment of the study. The same descriptive analysis has been done for the pretest and posttest of general English in the control group of the study. As you can see in table (5) below:

Table 5

Descriptive results of the control group of the study.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test Cont	30	15.0333	1.09807	0.2415
Post-test Cont	30	15.0542	1.07425	0.1961

Table (5) shows that the number of participants has been 21 in each experiment (N=21), and there has been no missing value. The mean for the pretest scores of general English in control group was shown to be 15.0333 as compared to the mean for the posttest scores of the same group which was shown to be 15.0542. As for the standard deviation obtained for the control group, there seems to be more variability among the pretest scores in the post test.

Inferential Analysis of the Data

This part focuses on the inferential analysis of the obtained data of the study. Such analysis was done using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) from which the compare mean, Independent sample test were selected for calculating the T value.

Table6

Independent Samples T-test results of the study t-test for Equality of Means.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance			T-Test for Equality of Mean					
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence interval of the Difference	Lower
Writing Equal Variances comprehension	0.000	0.756	0.079	58	0.0093	0.5556	.69923	-1.36545	1.47657

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assumed					
Equal					
Variances not assumed	0.0093	0.5556	.69923	-1.36555	1.47666

Table (6) shows that the observe T-value of the study was calculated as to be (4.3, 4.2) and the degree of freedom was (58). The level of significance

was calculated as to be 0.000. In each group of the study, the results have been illustrated in the table (4.4).

Table7

Paired Sample results of the study.

	Observed T	Critical T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test Ex- Post-test Exp	4.541	3.045	33	0.089
Pre-test Cont Post-test Cont	0.817	0.905	29	0.042

According to table (7), the covariance between the two sets of pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group is 4.541 while it is 0.817 in the control group of the study. The critical T in two groups is different. The hypothesis of the study which aimed the effect of social network on Iranian EFL learners' oral performance was rejected. Because observe T is bigger than the critical T. And the level of significant is 0.05.

Discussion

Social networking sites are already widely-spread and are here to stay. Nevertheless, it is still a rather young phenomenon and by far not at its end of development. On one hand, we have to deal with rather new communication and interaction patterns with which many users still have to get familiar with and to find its added value in the long term. On the other hand, the respective 'tools' and the technical platforms, are by far not really mature and stable yet. In addition, the regular changes of the existing features, e.g. on Facebook, strategy modifications, e.g. at Twitter, as well as the emergence of new platforms may be interpreted as the platforms' search for their position and sustainable business model. Most of the social network users are young individuals most of whom are university students. Hence, social network sites are considered to play an active role in younger generation's daily lives (Lenhart, 2009; Koca 2009). The finding of this study is in line with the results obtained by Rambe (2011). In line with the finding of Rambe (2011) who worked more specifically on the influence of social networking services on power lecture, this study was engaged more with the influence of SNS on a language skill. More consistently, Clark and Gruba (2010) obtained the same results as the present study. They claimed that using social networks is one of the effective ways to enhance foreign language learning.

These findings are the same with the research conducted by Kirschner and Karpinski (2010). Their experiment illustrated that there is a direct relationship between social networking site usage and the progress in academic performance of students. Among the 148 university pupils, it was concluded that Facebook users not only had a much lower Grand Point Average. Nevertheless, other studies such as Cohen (2007) showed completely opposite results. His study has been unable to prove any connections between GPA and SNS wide usage. According to the findings of the study done by Naditz (2009), there are numerous apparent advantages based on her experiences with integrating social networking sites in foreign language classrooms. First, using social networks tend to have a significant impression on language learning. The second benefit is that it helps students engage with peers in a familiar way and for academic purposes. More significantly for language learners, it provides opportunities for informal conversations in the target language. Further, Hung and Yuen (2010) pointed out that educational usage of social networking websites indeed positively affects educational performance of the students. Like study it was concluded that social networking affect students' oral performance. Further, a study conducted by Stanciu, Mihai and Aleca (2012) described the social networking as an alternative environment in which the students at higher levels of education develop their knowledge. The same results were also concluded by the present research.

Conclusion

Technology is a double-edged sword. Its power for bad and good resides in the users Baran (2010). Based on this, it is instructive to note that the relevant government authorities and other sponsors of the students have to take good measures to ensure

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that they (student) are made to be aware of how and why they use the social networking sites. Social networking is a phenomenon which has existed since the beginning of societies. Social networking provides a comfortable interface for speakers as students, colleagues and teachers. There are a number of ways to use social networking Web sites to encourage EFL learners to listen and to produce their own materials to share on the Internet. This type of activity used to be very difficult to integrate into EFL lessons due to costs and technical limitations; however, these barriers have slowly been fading, and it is now possible to use these online tools to improve students' English ability. This is useful, but

challenges remain. There is a certain amount of time needed for teachers and students to learn how to use Web 2.0 technology. Even if one is familiar with computers, there is still a need to learn how to use software, to search for podcasts, and set-up accounts with social networking Web sites. Additionally, the privacy issues of using social networking are a cause for concern. The security and privacy requirements of these sites are complicated and not well understood or defined (Ahn, Shehab, & Squicciarini, 2011). Thus it may become necessary for teachers to become knowledgeable in security policies on the shared data of students.

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