Developing Listening and Reading Skills through Social Media using Apps

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Abstract

We live in an era where we have numerous possibilities to learn English language using technology and online resources. Most of the time efforts are put in to emphasize the enhancement of the productive skills, speaking and writing, leaving the receptive skills, listening and reading which in reality play a great role in the development of productive skills, untrained. Social media can be effectively utilised for enhancing the listening and reading skills of ESL learners using its potential to engage learners beyond the traditional classroom scenario. According to Chartrand (2012), social media generate meaningful outlet and stimulate learners' interest which would result in effective language acquisition. This paper is based on a survey conducted among a few college students and their teachers in Kerala on their use of social media for learning and teaching purposes. It also make an attempt to demonstrate how the most commonly used social media like Facebook and WhatsApp can be used as a platform for improving listening and reading skills of ESL learners at tertiary level with the help of a few apps that can be downloaded from Google Play Store. Listening and reading skills enhancement via social media under the guidance of a teacher promotes autonomous learning as the learner can access materials wherever and whenever he/she wants and learn at his/her own pace.

Keywords

Google apps, listening and reading skills, social media

The elevation of English to the position of a global language demands its expertise an essential criterion for anyone who wants to pursue higher studies abroad or to get a job in a multinational company. Mastering of English language skills and becoming a competent user remain a distant dream to many even after learning it for more than 15 years. This led to the mushrooming of numerous spoken English coaching institutes and people are ready to spend thousands to become proficient in English language skills.

Many methods and approaches have been adopted to teach English over the years but none of them seemed to be 100% successful. Most of the time efforts are put in to emphasize the enhancement of the productive skills, speaking and writing, conveniently ignoring the receptive skills, leaving it untrained. Moreover, it is not possible to spend much time on the development of receptive skill in the classrooms due to heavy syllabus and the urgent need for its completion on time.

The advent of technology and online resources has opened numerous possibilities to learn English language in and out of the classroom. Among the latest online developments, the most powerful one is the social networking sites. Social media have become indispensible in a person's life and surveys show that the number of social media users increases tremendously every year. The role and influence of social media can be effectively utilized for teaching and learning though it is not designed to do so. According to McLaughlin and Lee (2008, p.I) Pedagogy 2.0 is integrating 'Web 2.0 tools that support knowledge, sharing, peer-to-peer networking and access to a global audience with socio-constructive learning approaches to facilitate greater learner autonomy, agency and personalization.' This underpins the potential of social networking tools to provide personalized and autonomous learning environment through peer networking and sharing.

In an annual survey conducted by Pearson in 2013 on the use of social media by higher education faculty, 59% of the faculty participated opined that the interactive nature of online and mobile technologies create better learning scenario. According to Vie (2007) social media provide a space for socialization and in the process of communication learners are exposed to authentic language when they interact for diverse social purposes. Moreover, they are perfect platforms for developing friendships with native speakers of English and experiment with learning through interactions.

Social media generate meaningful outlet and stimulate learners' interest which would result in effective language acquisition, says Chartrand (2012). Learners are open to new ideas and suggestions when they are relaxed and social networking tools are capable of providing a language rich learning environment using "comprehensible input" (Krashen,

1980). Social media tools not only increase motivation for learning (Clark and Grube, 2010, Stevenson and Lin, 2010) but facilitate authentic language learning environment which is essential to achieve high communicative competence in a foreign language (Karpati, 2009).

Learning through social media aligns with the community-of-practice theory proposed by Wenger in 1998 and connectivism by Downes and Siemens in 2005. Language learning through social media has a shared domain of interest, mutual engagement- as users collectively engage in discussion to achieve their goals, and provision of feedback by native speakers or language experts to other members which are all characteristics of community-of-practice theory. Connectivism explains the complex learning that happens through technological and network connections where new information is acquired continually.

The present study is an attempt to analyze how the social media like Facebook and WhatsApp are being used by the tertiary level students and their teachers in Kerala for language learning and teaching purposes and to enumerate how to use social media as a platform for developing the receptive skills of the learners with the help of easily available apps from Google Play Store.

Research Design and Population

The study adopted a survey research to assess the impact of social media on language teaching and learning at tertiary level. Almost 200 tertiary level ESL learners and 20 Asst. Professors of English from different colleges under Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala participated in the survey.

Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was designed to identify the attitude and opinion of teachers and learners on using social media for language learning and teaching activities. Two self-designed close ended questionnaires, one for teachers and one for students, were used for collecting the data.

Objectives of the Questionnaire

- To analyze the participants' accessibility and awareness on the usage of social media for learning
- To analyze the current usage of social networking media tools for teaching and learning activities.
- To collect learners' and teachers' opinion on using Facebook and WhatsApp for after class teaching and learning purposes.

Analysis of the questionnaires

The analysis of the survey questionnaire given to the students and teachers revealed that majority of the participants are active on social media like WhatsApp and Facebook. 74% of the students and 52% of teachers participated opined that they visit their Facebook account many times daily and 85% of students and 80% of teachers use their mobile phones to access their Facebook account. According to 88% of students and 65% of teachers, they do activities like chatting, watching and sharing videos, updating their timelines and uploading their photos when they are on Facebook and 78% of students and all the teachers participated opined that they are aware of the possibilities of learning and teaching respectively via Facebook. However, only 42% of students and 38% of teachers use Facebook for learning activities. But this was not the case with using WhatsApp for learning and teaching purposes. 94% of the students and 76% of teachers participated opined that they use WhatsApp for sharing pdf files, links and passing information. To the question whether they are interested to do after class assignments via Facebook and WhatsApp 83% of students agreed to it while 17% opined that Facebook and WhatsApp would not be accessible all the time. However, 35% of the teachers participated have doubts about the practicability of using social media for serious teaching and learning activities as they are not designed for those purposes. The investigation proved that most of the learners and teachers are regular users of Facebook and WhatsApp and are aware of the educational opportunities through social media though they use them only for very few teaching and learning activities. An informal interaction with a few teachers proved that though they want to utilize the facilities that technology offer for language teaching, the pressure of syllabus completion, lack of time for preparation and execution, insufficient infrastructure and at times large classrooms are the major hurdles they face when looking for its implementation.

Social Media as a Platform for Language Acquisition

The teacher after assessing "the needs and possibilities of a situation and creates and uses practices that have promise for that situation", says Zahoric (1986, p.22) while making an attempt to define Art -Craft approach to teaching. If the classroom set up does not provide support for the development of receptive skills of the learners, the teacher can search for the range of other options available and select one which is most suitable and cost effective.

Facebook and WhatsApp are two social media which can be easily utilized for language teaching and learning due to its accessibility, flexibility, popularity and reach. A teacher by creating a Facebook or WhatsApp group or Facebook pages for different classes or

subjects can use it a platform for sharing links, making announcements and posting videos to enhance the receptive skills of the learners.

A Few Apps for Developing Receptive Skills

Nowadays developing the listening and reading skills of the language learners is a serious concern for many language teachers. But the enhancement of the receptive skills is left ignored due to lack of time and materials and the pressure of completing the syllabus on time and also, they are not generally assessed in university examinations. Since receptive skills play a crucial role in the development of productive skills, its negligence would adversely affect the communicative skills of the learners and would never enable them to attain the language competency needed for a job as they depended on rote learning and mechanical memorization for scoring marks in the exams.

However, a change can be brought into the current teaching and learning scenario of the receptive skills if the language teacher puts in a little effort to utilize the enormous teaching-learning facilities that the internet and Google Play Store offer. The language teacher should make use of what is available rather than making a hue and cry for what is not present. Careful and judicious selection of apps from Play Store and motivation given to students to make use of these apps could solve the problem of receptive skill enhancement at tertiary level to a certain extent.

The following are a few apps that can be used for developing the reading and listening skill outside the classroom:

YouTube

YouTube, a video hosting website created in 2005 and now one of the Google's subsidiaries, allows it users to view, upload, download, share, rate, report and comment and add to favourite a wide variety of entertainment and educational videos, clippings of films and TV shows, documentaries and so on. While unregistered users are permitted only to watch videos, registered users can upload limitless number of videos. It does not require Adobe Flash Player or installation of any other plug-ins as it is capable of using built in multimedia of web browsers.

YouTube is an effective tool for developing listening skill of the language learners. It has thousands of videos that stimulate the interest of learners like interviews of celebrities from all fields where they share about their experiences, struggles they underwent to achieve fame and so forth. A teacher can easily avail interesting, creative and innovative videos on

topics related to the subject and can post it on Facebook page or on WhatsApp group for pre class or post class activities.

TED Talks

Ted talks are talks on scientific, cultural and academic topics conducted by TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) under the slogan *ideas worth spreading*. The speakers present their creative and innovative ideas or their life struggles and success often through storytelling to engage the audience in the best possible way.

Download the TED app which is available on Google Play Store to get talks by famous personalities on various topics. Options are there to search for the talk on our interest and to watch and share its link with others via social media or other apps. Subtitles of the talks are also available on choice while playing the talk. The availability of transcript of the talk helps the teacher give the learners what they have listened to for reading later.

English Listening Offline

This is an App meant for enhancing the listening skill of the learners through famous speeches by great personalities. The App once downloaded does not require internet for playing. A teacher can use this app for testing the listening skill of the learners inside the classroom even if internet or Wi-Fi facility is not available in the campus using a wireless portable Bluetooth speaker. The transcript of the matter gave for listening in the classroom can be shared on WhatsApp and Facebook for reading, followed by post reading activities.

Vocab 24

Vocab 24, a vocabulary builder app by The Hindu, is suitable for developing the reading and vocabulary skills of language learners. The app contains the editorials from three leading newspapers in India, The Hindu, Times of India and The Economic Times. Its features include an in- built dictionary, which gives a word's UK/US pronunciation on our choice, its meanings, synonyms and usages on tapping that word, a vocabulary learning video based on the editorials with certain clues to remember a word through a particular association, phrasal verbs and idioms and phrases learning sessions, a translator session which translates a word according to our choice language and practice tests. Another main feature of the app is the quiz part, based on the vocabulary learned, which contains 25 questions which have to be answered in 15 minutes. Once completing the quiz the participant receives an all India rank based on the performance. The participants can retry the same quiz but the rank would not be changed.

English teachers can make use of the possibilities of this app for developing the reading and vocabulary skills outside the classroom. The teacher can motivate the students to use the app daily and post a screenshot of their best ranking of the week on a particular day assigned on the Facebook or WhatsApp group. Thus a teacher can effectively utilize this app for assessing the reading and vocabulary skills of the learners.

Vocab Stories

While Vocab 24 is a vocabulary builder app using news Vocab Stories has different stories to enhance the reading skill of the learners. The app itself highlights the difficult words on the stories and its meaning is available on a tap. After reading a story, the learner can test the vocabulary learned from it with the help of a test available in the app and the screenshot of score can be sent to the teacher via WhatsApp.

Home Library

It is an app available in the Google Play Store which offers a huge collection of 2400 books. The names of the authors are arranged in alphabetical order along with the option to search an author or his/her book. The teacher can encourage the learners to download this app and read a story every day to develop their reading skills and can plan interesting post reading activities on Facebook or WhatsApp based on the stories read in the class.

Google Play Store has numerous other apps for enhancing the listening and reading skills of language learners. The features and specialties of these mobile applications vary and the choice and integration of these apps depend on teachers' expertise, size of the class, learners' interest and their requirement. A little effort from the teachers' side can brought about a huge difference in the learning process by making the learning stress free and natural.

Conclusion

Studies and findings on the impact of social media learning suggest that people feel connected and relaxed when they are on social media as it promotes socialization and offers stress free ambience. However, despite its wide accessibility, flexibility and ability to disseminate information rapidly there are chances of information overload, risks of privacy violations, cyber bullying and stalking. Also, teachers' technical and digital competencies, internet accessibility and expertise in integrating various mobile applications into language teaching and giving appropriate guidance, instructions and timely feedback to motivate learners are essential to set up a powerful learning environment on social media. The effective integration of technology takes place only when the teacher has a proper plan to

execute a sound pedagogy as Spiro (2013) says "the critical factor in success is the commitment and belief of the teacher in the methods he or she is using, and the continuing reflection of the teacher as to whether these methods are making a positive difference" (p.218). Hence, though the teacher, as a facilitator, has the freedom to choose any tool/method for making a difference in the process of teaching, his/her commitment, belief in the method adopted and constant evaluation of the method/tool and the adoption of changes based on learners' response are crucial for building up an authentic language learning environment through social media using apps.

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