

Student Views of Language Learning Through Online Social Network Services

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Abstract : This research looked at student attitudes concerning the use of social network services for language learning purposes. Online interactions have the potential to increase access to education for many groups. Data collected from interviews suggested that although students are open to using online social networks for education, there are many obstacles to overcome in order to achieve successful adoption.

Key words : language learning, social network services, student attitudes

Introduction

Recent events, notably the COVID-19 global pandemic, have highlighted the potential of online learning. While increasing the accessibility and usability of online education technology is necessary, it is also important not to lose sight of the social requirements of students. Education is not only about academic learning, the skills and connections that students develop at school or university through interactions with their peers, teachers, and administrative staff can help create well-rounded individuals who are integrated into society.

An unintended yet unfortunate consequence of online or distance learning is a decrease in the amount of extramural contact students have. One possible way of ameliorating this is to combine online learning with online social network service (SNS) use. SNS platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have the potential for creating and maintaining social contacts over differences in both distance and time due to the opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous communication that they provide.

The use of online social network services (SNSs) extends across a wide range of demographic and geographic groups. As of the third quarter of 2019 there were over 2.4 billion active monthly users of Facebook alone (Statista, 2019). Uptake and participation in SNSs by young people is particularly high, with nearly 90% of people in the 18–29 age group using online social networks in the United States in 2019 (Pew Research Centre, 2019). In addition to high levels of participation, the ubiquity of smartphone ownership among students in countries such as Japan has created a situation where their access to online content is practically constant. A 2018 report by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) in Japan indicated that over 82% of 13– to 19–year olds, rising to almost 95% of 20– to 29–year olds, accessed the internet via smartphones (MIC, 2018).

This investigation looked into the attitudes and beliefs of university students in Japan regarding the use of SNSs for language learning purposes. In particular, attention was paid to the reasons the participants could envision for learning via SNSs, and any potential impediments they could foresee. A qualitative study utilising interviews was chosen in order to fully explore the views of the participants. Prior to the interviews the participants were given several opportunities to perform various tasks on SNSs. These tasks were carried out on Twitter, Instagram, and Line. The tasks were all designed to mimic regular actions performed by the users of those platforms, such as tagging a photo and responding to comments about it.

Participation in the tasks was completely voluntary.

In the following section I will discuss the manner in which candidates for the interviews were selected, the procedures used during the interviews themselves, and finally the analysis that was performed on the data collected.

Methodology

Interviewees were selected from those who volunteered in order to create a group that included both males and females, as well as those who did and did not participate in the tasks. Prior to commencement of the interviews informed consent was obtained from all of the participants.

A number of preliminary questions were developed in advance of the interviews. At each stage of the interview process supplementary questions were asked when appropriate to encourage the interviewees to expand on promising topics.

After all the interviews had been completed, the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Japanese. These scripts were then translated into English and the translations were verified by two bilingual L1 Japanese speakers. The translated interview scripts were then uploaded with the original audio files into Atlas.ti (Version 8). A multistep process was then followed to create a set of codes that reflected themes that emerged from the interviews. This process was based upon the guidelines suggested by Saldaña (2009).

Table 1 below shows the coding themes and aspects produced by the coding process. It also displays the number of mentions of each theme by the interviewees among those who participated in the SNS tasks and those who did not.

Table 1 *Coding themes and number of mentions*

Coding theme	Aspect	Participant	Non-participant
Reasons for SNS use	English communication	6	6
	English information	2	1
	Employment	4	3
	Improve Skills	3	8
Impediments to SNS use	Lack of opportunity	3	9
	Japanese only	6	12
	Lack of specific skills	4	3
	Privacy issues	4	8

Table 2 below shows a summary of the interviewee data : age, gender, the SNS platforms they use, and the SNS tasks they completed. The names used are pseudonyms.

Table 2 *Summary of interviewees*

	Saki	Kana	Taku	Miho	Ryota	Yuki
Age	19	18	18	18	18	18
Gender	female	female	male	female	male	female
SNS used	L, I & T	L, I & T	L, I & T	L & T	L, I & T	L & I
Tasks	None	None	None	L	I & T	I

Notes : L = Line, I = Instagram, T = Twitter

Results

Reasons for SNS use – English communication and information

The first two aspects covered in relation to reasons for using SNSs are for English communication and accessing English information. In this case the interviewees mainly view the use of SNSs for English communication in hypothetical terms. Kana linked increased use of English for communicating on SNSs with increases in proficiency and employment prospects ;

“I guess if you used English regularly, by the time you come to look for a job it will be easier to communicate in English... so it might be useful.” (Kana)

Yuki was one of the only interviewees to make reference to actually using English on SNSs :

“Sometimes I put a simple English word in a Japanese sentence, for example ‘I’m (happy) today’ [laughs]. Sometimes I like to use words that I’ve learnt. But I never really think about writing a whole sentence in English.” (Yuki)

There were only three mentions of the use of SNSs to access English information. Yuki conveyed that a low level of confidence in her English ability held back her use of it on SNSs. However, she did acknowledge the wealth of information that would be opened up if she had a greater level of English ability :

“There’re not many people in the world who know Japanese, are there? But with English I think there are people all over the world you can get in contact with and see their information. If my English were better I’d like to write in English.” (Yuki)

It can be seen from the examples provided that using SNSs for English communication and accessing English information is not widespread among the interviewees, although they do see the conceivable benefits of using them for those purposes.

Reasons for SNS use – Employment and improving skills

The interviewees tended to agree that having English skills was a positive when it came time to look for a job :

“Recently it seems like candidates who can use English are favoured. It seems like they have an advantage. I’ve really noticed that recently, being able to use English and not being able to are really different.” (Yuki)

However, they seemed sceptical that English use on SNSs could lead directly to employment opportunities :

“If you tweet in English, I doubt this would happen [laughs], but if someone from an overseas company saw it and replied that could lead to a potential career chance.” (Ryota)

When it came to using English on SNSs to improve language skills, however, the interviewees were much more positive. Although she did not participate in any of the SNS tasks, Kana could see how using English online might improve specific language skills :

“For vocabulary and expressions, err... if you come in to contact with English regularly I think your ability will improve.” (Kana)

However, another of the interviewees failed to see a distinction between using English on SNSs and traditional study methods :

“It’s okay to post something in English, I guess. But I don’t think it’s any different from just writing something in English. Posting in English or just been told ‘write this in English’, I think they both have the same effect on improving English ability.” (Taku)

Impediments to SNS use – Lack of opportunity and Japanese only

The interviews provided a useful insight into the impediments to the use of English of SNSs as perceived by the participants in the study. Saki made numerous mentions of a lack of opportunity when discussing English use on SNSs. The two comments below illustrate her perceived lack of exposure and also her belief that not having friends from abroad was a limiting factor in her online use of English :

“I don’t really come across English. On Twitter etcetera I don’t come across people using English.”

“I think if I had more foreign friends I’d use it more.” (Saki)

The next impediment I will focus on is the notion that the interviewees see themselves as residing in a monolingual bubble, surrounded exclusively by Japanese speakers. This was a very common theme in the interviews, producing the highest number of comments, despite none of the questions specifically prompting observations on that theme. Taku alone made nine comments related to this theme. Here are a couple of examples :

“The people I’m communicating with are Japanese so why use English?”

“If, like me, all your friends are Japanese then I don’t really see any advantages to using English. They just think, ‘Why is he writing in English?’” (Taku)

The last examples on this theme come from Ryota, who did try some of the tasks. Ryota’s comments expressed the sentiment that he did not wish to cause discomfort among his Japanese only social network by introducing English content. In particular, the second comment demonstrates his perception that English use might be unwelcome :

“Some of my friends aren’t very good at English, so they’re more likely to understand if I tweet in Japanese. I’m not really tweeting to the world as such ; it is just for fun among friends. So that’s why I don’t use English.”

“People who don’t understand or don’t like English will think ‘What is he on about?’ People who don’t understand will prefer it if you write in Japanese.” (Ryota)

Impediments to SNS use – Lack of specific skills and privacy issues

When asked to discuss changes that might make them increase their use of English on SNSs the interviewees frequently mentioned a lack of specific skills that held them back. Sometimes, as in the case of Ryota below, these were common elements of language :

“I’m not really confident with my vocabulary or grammar, so if I had a bit more knowledge I’d probably use it more.” (Ryota)

However, several of the interviewees additionally focused in on skills and techniques specific to the realm of online communication :

“That thing where English speakers don’t use y–o–u to say you, they just use ‘U’. I don’t really understand that, so if I understood those kinds of expressions and emojis etcetera. I think it’d be easier to communicate.” (Miho)

Privacy issues were also unsurprisingly a theme that emerged during the interviews. For two of the interviewees who did not participate in any of the tasks, privacy concerns were cited as reasons why they would not favour their adoption into coursework :

“Some of my friends only want to use SNSs for personal use. They might not like having to use it.” (Saki)

“I fundamentally only use SNSs for personal use. I don’t really want to use it for anything connected with school.” (Taku)

Discussion

Reasons for Use

During the interviews a large number of comments were made regarding possible reasons for the use of English on SNSs. In the following section I will first discuss possible reasons for L2 SNS use as they related to English communication and information. I will then discuss the comments made regarding employment and improving skills.

English communication and information

There was widespread recognition of the usefulness of English for communicating with people from different linguistic backgrounds, from both those who did and did not complete the online tasks. Some of the participants linked the use of English as a communication tool on SNSs to increased proficiency, and through that improved job prospects. However, apart from the mention by one interviewee of using stand-alone English words within Japanese sentences, there was no reported use of actually using English on SNSs.

There were much fewer mentions of using English to view the greater range of information made accessible through it online. However, one participant at least did concede that, in comparison to Japanese, she would be exposed to a much wider variety of people and information if she were able to use English.

Employment and improving skills

There was a considerable amount of scepticism when it came to the possibility of using English on SNSs improving employment opportunities. Although some of the interviewees suggested that the use of English on SNSs might improve their job prospects if their English ability increased, in general they thought it unlikely that merely using English online would have any effect.

On the other hand, the interviewees were almost uniform in their belief that using English on SNSs would lead to an improvement in their English skills. This stemmed from the idea that frequent use would improve their reading and writing skills and increase their knowledge of vocabulary and expressions. Incidental learning of this kind would be the anticipated outcome for English use on SNSs.

Impediments to Use

Unsurprisingly, those interviewees who did not participate in any of the online tasks offered up more impediments to the use of English on SNSs than those who attempted them. The first set of impediments that I will discuss concern a lack of opportunity or time, and a Japanese only environment. I will then move onto the impediments caused by a lack of SNS specific skills and privacy related issues.

Lack of opportunity and Japanese only

Comments regarding a lack of opportunity in the interviews tended to focus on how the participants seldom encountered English in their day-to-day SNS use. This was primarily attributed to all of their social network contacts being Japanese, foreshadowing the Japanese only theme I will discuss below. The interviewees did, however, suggest that they would look at English content if it appeared on their feeds. They were just unlikely to seek it out themselves.

By far the largest number of comments suggesting impediments to using English on SNSs were those concerning the Japanese only environment the participants see themselves as inhabiting. The interviewees stated that they could see no need to use English as their social circle was made up exclusively of Japanese speakers. In addition to a lack of necessity, they also suggested that others in their online networks might feel uncomfortable if they were to use English. This was due to the sense that people without sufficient language skills to understand the content would resent English being used. These concerns mirrored those expressed in Lai and her colleagues' investigation of L2 learners in Hong Kong (Lai, Hu, & Lyu, 2018). The participants in that study also mentioned the fear that posts not made in their L1 would not be understood by their friends.

Lack of specific skills and privacy issues

The final set of impediments mentioned by the interviewees that I will discuss are those related to a lack of specific skills and privacy issues. Several of the interviewees suggested that they did not possess adequate knowledge of English vocabulary or grammar to use the language online. They also felt that they did not know enough internet specific slang and expressions to be able to converse in English online. Although overcoming a self-perceived lack of English ability is something that cannot easily be accomplished, instruction in internet communication forms would hopefully be able to address some of the concerns. Lamb and Arisandy (2019) discussed the need for teachers to be cognisant of the language learning

opportunities provided by out-of-class online activities. There is undoubtedly a need for language educators to be aware of their students' online L2 interactions and to attempt to facilitate them. Additionally, the topic of L2 learners and internet communication forms is itself one that would benefit from further investigation. The study in Hong Kong elicited concerns from some of the participants that the English they encountered on SNSs was inaccurate, and presumably not a suitable model to follow (Lai, Hu, & Lyu, 2018). These concerns seem to present an opportunity for educators to engage with their students in discussions regarding appropriate forms.

The issue of privacy is one that is at the forefront of discussions about SNS use. In order to be able to facilitate language learning in the wilds of online communication, careful consideration of the privacy needs of the users will need to be made. Several of the interviewees indicated that they severely limited access to their social-media accounts, and expressed concerns suggesting that they would be wary of opening them up to public interactions. Some were also against the idea of utilising SNSs for course-related work, as they preferred to keep them solely for private use.

Conclusion

As more and more communication moves onto the internet, the need for educators to harness that effort, and to develop teaching practices that promote learning through it, becomes ever greater. By investigating some of the factors impacting upon L2 SNS behaviour, this study has demonstrated the potential there is for utilizing social media use for language learning.

This research has also highlighted some of the obstacles that need to be overcome in order to facilitate meaningful learning opportunities. These include identifying the necessary skills for learners to acquire in order to navigate through the initial stages of L2 SNS use. Overcoming these obstacles will require an ongoing effort on the part of educators to understand the evolving nature of online communication forms, and the changing requirements language learners will need in order to adapt to them.

When considering the pedagogical implications of this study it is necessary to acknowledge the type of online activity that was employed. As these online tasks were designed primarily to mimic simple SNS behaviours the participants were likely to engage in in their L1, they were not created with educational value as criterion. If SNS based activities are to be utilised for language learning purposes, they would need to be adapted with clear teaching goals in mind. For example, SNS searches could be used for vocabulary focused tasks where well-defined language targets are identified in advance. Online tasks could also be used as awareness raising activities to introduce diverse forms of language and expression. In order to facilitate these types of educational opportunities, activities aimed at fostering self-directed learning, such as discussions and strategy sessions, would be beneficial for empowering students with the tools to expand their language learning beyond the confines of the classroom. Lai (2013) suggested that interventions should concentrate on developing language learners' willingness to use technology and relevant skill sets. This project demonstrated that the students in this context are at least open to the prospect of incorporating SNS use into their language learning.

As mentioned in the introduction to this study, the synchronous and asynchronous communication capabilities of SNSs have the potential of compensating for the lack of social interactions caused by online education. The use of SNSs and other online resources could therefore not only increase access to authentic English content and communication for language learners, it could also improve social access to their

peers for students with special needs, students in rural areas, and students facing pandemic related restrictions, where physical access to classroom-based instruction can be limited. An increase in accessibility via use of SNSs could have positive implications for all stakeholders within the educational process.

However, the ethical issues raised by the prospect of using SNSs for educational purposes are a necessary consideration. These concerns are particularly relevant in regard to protecting the privacy and online safety of students. One way to ameliorate these concerns for L2 learning purposes is to create a virtual language exchange. If the language exchange environment were created and monitored by the educator or institution, some of the privacy and safety concerns that come with online communications can be minimised, while still retaining the accessibility benefits brought by utilising online communication.

Moving forward it is clear that the rapidly fluctuating needs of online learning, along with the incessant development of online tools such as SNSs, requires a flexible and responsive approach. It is also necessary to recognize that different individuals utilize SNSs in different ways. Some users are very active, whilst others are much more passive in their online behavior (Robinson, Callahan, Boyle, Rivera, & Cho, 2017). Therefore, any incorporation of SNSs into educational practices should be carefully planned and monitored to ensure it adequately matches the current online environment and the needs of those using it.

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