Potential use of social networking tool to assist reading comprehension: implications for practice and future research

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Abstract   From a social constructivist viewpoint, reading is viewed as a social practice. The emergence of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis and social networking sites, provide wide opportunities to generate active interactions among learners in and out of the classroom. Unlike students in the past who were receptive learners of knowledge and in the reading context 'mute outsiders', students today are encouraged to be active constructors of their own learning environment. They are encouraged to learn not as isolated individuals, but as active members of society. This paper aims to examine the features of social networking sites with particular emphasis given to Edmodo, a secure social learning network for teachers and students, and the potential use of Edmodo in improving reading comprehension among young adult learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The findings suggest that Edmodo can be potentially beneficial to the teaching and learning of reading due to several reasons: (1) positive learners' perceptions and attitudes, (2) the likelihood of improved performance and (3) opportunities for engagement among the community of practice. Pedagogical implications for integration of social networking in teaching and learning are also discussed.

Introduction

The practice of reading in a classroom is always viewed as a passive activity (Nunan, 1999). Students are as considered as passive receivers of ideas and knowledge. They accept unquestioningly the words of the teacher and play the role of 'mute outsiders' to the reading process (Penrose and Geisler, 1994). This landscape, however, is beginning to change as an increasing number of teachers believe that students should participate actively in class, joining in interactive language learning tasks and becoming autonomous learners (Yang and Wilson, 2006). In this respect, students in a reading class should position themselves as participants in meaning making. This opinion is supported by researchers advocating the social constructivist (Yang and Wilson, 2006) approach to reading strategies and metacognition (Mokhtari and Reichard, 2002; Singhal, 2001; Schraw, 1998; and Schraw and Moshman, 1995).

Reading activity is the foundation of learning new knowledge and gaining new skills, and comprehension is the heart of reading (Chen, Teng, Lee and Kinshuk, 2011). Although comprehension is desirable, achieving it proves challenging to English Language teachers. Two problems have been identified. First, research on reading have revealed that successful readers or skilled readers focus on reading as a meaning-getting process, yet there are still readers who focus on reading as a decoding process thus making them unsuccessful or unskilled readers (Baker and Brown, 1984). Meaning making, guided by metacognitive awareness, can lead to better comprehension in reading. Metacognitive awareness is knowledge about ourselves, the tasks we face, and the strategies we employ (Baker and Brown, 1984).

Second, research indicates that student engagement with the materials they are reading should be the persistent goal for educators (Bomia, Beluzo, Demeester, Elander, Johnson and Sheldon,

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1997). One way of raising students' engagement is by using the active learning discussion approach to reading involving pedagogical methods such as in-class discussion, questioning, debate and explaining. However, the typical physical classroom layout in many educational institutions in which students are seated in rows facing the blackboard and teacher's desk can inhibit the maximum effectiveness of these methods. Additionally, the big number of students within an individual classroom costs time as students need to take their turns in sharing opinions and get feedback from their peers (Du et al, 2010). These inconveniences made most English language teachers to revert to the lecture method of teaching, hence, prevent active learning to take place.

Potential use of social networking technology to facilitate reading comprehension

Social networking is a technology that involves grouping specific individuals or organizations together in an online environment to interact for either personal or business purposes. Many social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter and Edmodo are built with microblogging technology. Microblogging is simply the activity of blogging but within smaller size. A weblog or simply known as blog is a type of website or part of a website usually maintained by an individual who posts regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or videos. Unlike other static websites, visitors of a blog can leave comments and even message each other on the blogs. This feature allows bloggers to build social relations with their readers and other bloggers. A microblog also maintains many of the blog's features. However, it differs from a traditional blog in that its content is typically smaller in both actual and aggregate file size. Thus only small elements of content such as short sentences, images or links can be posted.

Many scholars have called for teachers to utilize the social networking technology to support teaching and learning activities. In the context of reading, this technology allows communication to occur parallel to the course enabling students to initiate discussions outside the classroom contexts. For instance, Ebner and Schiefner (2008) noted that learning is a social process that develops through conversation. Thus the ability to communicate with others is an essential part

through all learning processes. Microblogging built in the social networking sites seems to have the potential to extend these possibilities by providing the platform to facilitate reading interactivity, develop autonomous learning and support meaning making activities. Users too can share and communicate their ideas, and work collaboratively to produce co-authored works (Abbitt, 2007; Bosch, 2009; Du, Carroll, and Rosson, 2010; Ebner, 2009).

However, Corbell and Corbell (2011) present some concerns expressed by several students in their social networking study concerning the use of microblogs, particularly Twitter, in educational environments. The concerns are related to the issue of public versus private use of the technology. The students were uncomfortable mixing their personal, trivial or potentially inappropriate messages with class-related messages. Such concerns prompt educators to find alternative technology that will allow for a more secure or private online environment for classroom purposes.

A more private social networking site, Edmodo, is seen as one of the possible alternatives to popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Myscpace. It provides a safer platform for students to being academically involved such as raising questions and share their views, reflections and critiques. Edmodo is a free secure social learning network for teachers and students. By limiting access to educational endeavors, teachers and students can send notes, links, files, alerts, assignments and events to each other in a secure environment, hence enabling its members to enjoy all the benefits of microblogging, minus the drawback of being completely open to the global community. To facilitate multiple, simultaneous discussions, teachers can creates 'groups' for each of their classes. Each group is assigned its own unique code, which is distributed by teachers to all the class members. The groups are self-contained so those without access will be unable to view the discussions, unless the instructor designates them as public. An added feature of Edmodo is that students can create their own groups as well. Participants can opt to receive posts through their cell phones, e-mail, Twitter or through an RSS feed posted on the course home page (Edmodo, 2012).

The purpose of this review paper is to examine the affordances offered by and the potential use of the social learning network for teachers and students, in the context of English language learning. Specifically this review is guided by this question: In what ways can social learning network improve reading comprehension among young adult learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)? Following section will present the methodology used in this conducting the review.

Literature search strategy

The literature search began with the focus of understanding the general features of social networking sites and their potential use to improve reading comprehension among young adult EFL learners. A search of the Web of Science (WOS) educational database and GoogleScholar, a popular search engine for academic papers using the keywords "social networking", "English Language Teaching (ELT)", "reading", "Web 2.0" and "integration" were employed in various combinations. A snowball sampling strategy was also employed in which references in the selected articles were reviewed for additional sources of information.

The first round of searches yielded hundreds of papers from various sources including journal articles, chapters from books, conference proceedings and an opinion paper. Second round of searches were conducted to identify only sources relevant to the aims of this review. The following four inclusion criteria was applied: (1) the sources described the use of the social networking technology, (2) in the context of English reading comprehension, (3) at higher education learning environment, and (4) for research-based articles, only studies with empirical data were accepted. Articles pertaining to schema and extensive reading were eliminated as the focus of this review aims to explore the potentials of microblogging in improving reading comprehension of EFL learners.

Findings

Articles relevant to the purpose of this review paper were analyzed. As a result, three main themes were identified related to the potential use of social networking sites in improving reading comprehension among young adult learners of EFL learners. The three themes are: (1) encouraging positive attitudes and perceptions among learners, (2) improving learners' performance, and (3) developing sense of community and engagement among learners.

Encourage positive attitudes and perceptions among learners

Several researchers have documented students' positive attitudes and perceptions towards social networking as potential learning tools in the English teaching and learning contexts. For instance, Noytim (2010) investigated the potential value of weblogging for English language learning in a university in Thailand. The findings indicated that the students perceived the activity as a valuable tool in assisting their English language writing and reading skills, as well as increasing their use of vocabularies as they recorded their learning experiences using the tool. The findings are consistent with Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) who also found that Facebook, an example of microblogging technology, is well-received as potential learning tool among undergraduate students. It is also perceived as alternative online environment to facilitate the learning of English.

Along the same line, Bosch (2009) noted that social networking also encourages students to ask questions they might otherwise not ask in traditional face-to-face classroom. As there is a relative degree of anonymity in the absence of face-to-face interaction, the discomfort of having to ask in front of a physical audience is greatly diminished. In an interview conducted by Bosch (2009), the lecturer noted the usefulness of the tool to his/her class of 300 students especially in providing the space for students to ask questions and share problems related to topic discussed in

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class. Such phenomenon is different in his/her regular face-to-face classroom in which students are shy to raise their hand if they have problems but they will boldly say their problems in online environment. The lecturer's description echoes Palloff and Pratt (2001) who argue that introvert learners perform well, quite verbal, interactive and less self-conscious in online learning environment.

The advantage of using social networking as a teaching and learning tool also relates to its ability to conveniently facilitate learners' reflections on their everyday experiences. Yang (2009) revealed that student teachers who were attending practicum admitted the usefulness and the convenience of using blogs to reflect and give comments about their teaching practices. Additionally the tool allows learners to actively interact with and reflect on one another's postings (Kufi and Ozgur, 2009) which lead to collaborative learning experiences among them.

Improved learners' performance

Several past studies conducted have revealed the following improvements in students' academic performance when online activities are integrated into English teaching and learning. Stakhnevich (2002) compared her ESL undergraduates' reading comprehension using the web and traditional print mode and found that the former indicated better performance than the latter. The results are similar to of Park and Kim (2011). They examined the reading strategies used by English as Second Language (ESL) learners in a series of online reading tasks. Their study revealed that ESL 'hybrid' online readers, regardless of their language proficiency, actively and creatively make meanings and develop their reading strategies.

Students also reported that social networking technology benefits the development of their writing skills. In a study 180 students who were given tasks to write for academic and technical purposes, Jati (2006) found that the tool enable students to broaden their knowledge on various ways of writing. This is made possible by the ability of reading from their classmates' written

works online and compared them to of theirs. Additionally students' writing skills are improved when they have the opportunity to discuss their works with peers on specific topics. Finally students also are able to support their writing with various articles published on the web, synthesized them and included the points in their own works (Priyanto, 2006).

Improvement in academics performances can be related to various affordances supported by the social networking technology. First, the technology enables students to have direct access to digital materials whenever needed. Coupled with the use of print-based materials manually available, the integrated manual and digital materials benefits English reading comprehension activities (Chen, Teng and Lee, 2011).

Secondly, the technology provides the conveniences of sharing thoughts with others and receives feedback from others with a click of button and within a short time period. Some scholars also reported that students learn unexpected skills beyond the limit of the course content as a result of being involved in learning via social networking technology. This relates to the concept of incidental learning, the unintentional or unplanned learning resulting from any academic or non-academic activities (Kabilan et al, 2010). Such learning has been said to be especially effective when completing tasks using computers (Cahoon, 1995) and in the online environment (McFerrin, 1999) through learning activities such as observation, repetition, social interaction and problem solving.

Sense of community and engagement among learners

Another interesting finding is that teachers are found to be more student-centered when teaching and learning is done online. This is because, the online activities constructed are aimed at promoting students' autonomy in which learners learn on their own and be creative and innovative. Social networking offers learners with the ability to have supportive relationships

with other users, greater sense of ownership and control over their learning processes, and support the concept of learning with and from each other in safe and trusting environment.

The course materials put on the Web allow students to access them any time anywhere, allowing flexibility in teaching and learning. Teachers are also able to modify materials to suit proficiency levels of the students, while students can use and employ a variety of learning styles in their learning. Students can also share resources and discuss their work with an audience outside their immediate classroom (Tunku Mohani and Mohd. Rashid, 2007). Similarly, Bosch (2009) found that many Facebook groups appear to serve the purpose of community building, keeping members of specific academic programs in touch with one another via the website, and for information sharing among people who meet in 'real world' environments. Kufi and Ozgur (2009) quoted a respondent saying that learning via social networking technology allows her to learn vocabulary with peers and instructor as they work together on word forms and construct sentences using the new words that they learnt together.

Another study by English and Howell (2008) also concluded that students appreciate the use of Facebook technology to gain more support from their lecturers and peers during teaching practicum. This conclusion was made based on their Facebook posts which were mostly associated with affective communication such as group reinforcement, encouragement, and support. This observation suggests that the sense of community was strong in this group.

Implications

Based on the findings of past studies, it could be suggested that Edmodo, a more private platform of social networking technology, could be successfully employed in the teaching of reading as general pedagogical benefits can be seen in integrating social networking in teaching and learning.

First, because Edmodo allows students to post comments, send notes, links, files, alerts, assignment and events, and send direct messages to the instructor, it can be a beneficial tool for enhancing learning. Moreover, there will be improved attitudes in learning among learners because the confidential one-to-one interactions between students and teacher can encourage weaker and more introverted students to ask questions and clarify their doubts in the subjects learnt. Also, an absence of face-to-face interactions can reduce the discomfort of having to ask in front of a physical audience.

Second, the collaborative features on Edmodo where multiple and simultaneous discussions can take place within a group can improve learners' performance. This is because such discussions encourages incidental learning to take place. In addition, online quizzes can be administered to assess students' performances summatively and formatively. Furthermore, teachers are able to encourage the learners by awarding them reward badges when they perform well in their quizzes and assignments. This will motivate them to engage in the planned learning activities.

Finally, like other social networking sites, Edmodo provides students with a sense of community and engagements in their learning with an added security advantage. In this respect, unlike the other social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, each teacher-created group in Edmodo is assigned their own unique code; hence, groups are self-contained and access is limited to educational endeavors only. This in turn provides a safe and trusting environment where learning can take place. Besides teacher-created groups, students can also create their own sub-groups, in other words, a group within a group. This will eventually promote more student-centered learning, supportive relationships among group members and a sense of ownership and control over the learning process.

Table 1 below summarizes the findings on the benefits of general social networking technology and its potential use for teaching reading using Edmodo.

Benefits of social networking	Benefits of social networking in relation to Edmodo
1. Positive attitudes and perceptions among learners: • a beneficial tool for developing learning • a confidential one-on-one interactions between students and teacher, thus encouraging weaker students to ask questions and clarify doubts • an absence of face-to-face interactions, thus reducing discomfort of having to ask in front of a physical audience	Edmodo allows students to: • post comments and send notes, links, files, alerts, assignment and events, and • send direct messages to the instructor.
2. Improved learners' performance: • "Learning is a cognitive and social process that develops through conversation." (Dewey, 1916) • increased interactions among community of learners • encourages incidental learning	Edmodo has: • collaborative learning features where multiple and simultaneous discussions can take place within a group, • create-a-quiz feature and ready-made quizzes (open-ended or multiple-choice questions) to formatively and summatively assess students' performance, and • reward badges, which a teacher can assign to a student, acts as a motivator.

3. Sense of community and engagements among learners: • student-centered learning • supportive relationships • sense of ownership and control over learning • safe and thrusting environment	Edmodo allows: • each teacher-created group to be assigned their own unique code, hence groups are self-contained, and • students to create own sub-groups i.e. a group within a group.

Table 1 The potentials of employing Edmodo in improving reading comprehension

Conclusion

Given the fact that most of the literature regarding the integration of Web 2.0 tools in teaching and learning has been mostly positive, it can be suggested that Edmodo could have potential benefits in the teaching and learning of reading. First, positive learners' perceptions and attitudes on other Web 2.0 tools can be applicable to the use of Edmodo. Furthermore, improved performance in other skills through the exchange of ideas and reflections in blogs, wikis and social networking sites suggests that reading skills and reading comprehension can be enhanced through microblogging on Edmodo. Finally, the sense of belonging to a community of practice has proven to allay learner's fears and anxieties. This is achieved through supportive group interactions where students can help their peers achieve their individual goals. The microblogging affordance of Edmodo can enhance and aid discussions and peer support either emotionally or cognitively.

Today's learners are millenials, or also known as the 'net generation' or 'Gen Y', who are internet savvy users (Tunku Mohani and Mohd. Rashid, 2007). They also learn very differently

from the way many current academicians and our existing educational system have taught previously (Prensky, 2001). Therefore, when educators fail to engage students with activities they are interested in, schools and other educational institutions run the risk of becoming irrelevant to the culture of discourse for young people and to the way in which young people interact and exchange ideas (Atwell, n.d.). The integration of Internet technology and the use of Web-based materials in teaching and learning is now eminent. Students today need to be self-directed learners who can access and use a lot of resources and information to construct their own meaning. As Tunku Mohani & Mohd. Rashid (2007) aptly stated that today's learners can gain a wealth of information, knowledge and skills from engaging in Web-based activities, sometimes beyond planned curricula.

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