

Perceptions of Using Social Media as an ELT Tool among EFL Teachers in the Saudi Context

Madawi Allam¹ & Tariq Elyas¹

¹ English Language Institute, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Madawi Allam, English Language Institute, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
E-mail: madawi.allam@gmail.com

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Abstract

Social media technologies have undeniably become an integral part of people's lives and they have been widely used amongst the new generations, particularly, university students. This widespread of social media technologies has certainly made a huge impact on the way people learn and interact with each other resulting in the emergence of communities of learning that are supported by collective intelligence. This study is based on quantitative methods using a survey instrument to gather descriptive data regarding the perceptions of seventy-five ($n=75$) randomly chosen male and female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at two Saudi tertiary institutions. The study utilized a 14 Likert scale statements where each statement had five Likert-type items for the participants to choose from. Analysis of the gathered data indicated that the majority of the participants believe strongly in the pedagogical values and benefits of using social media as an ELT tool in the EFL classes in the Saudi context. Nevertheless, the majority expressed reservations with regards to the extent to which social media can be freely allowed to be used in the EFL classroom where they perceive it as having a double edged sword effect and that is mainly due to some undesired distractions that some students may resort to which may occasionally result in the opposite of the intended effect of their usage. The study recommends more research studies in this area so as to closely understand how experienced EFL teachers utilize social media in their classes in order to develop best practices for implementing social media in teaching and learning in EFL in the Saudi contexts

Keywords: social media, EFL, Saudi Arabia, ELT, survey, likert scale

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

In the past decade, social media technologies have certainly caused a revolution in the world of communication and networking. The emergence of social media over the last decade has undoubtedly impacted the way people around the world interact with each other, as well as the way they access the abundance of wealth of information that surrounds them and their societies. The wealth of information that is available on social media websites can now be accessed at anytime from anywhere in the world due to the features that are best known as cloud-based technologies (Johnson, Adams, & Cummins, 2012). These social media technologies have also caused a paradigm shift in education all over the globe resulting in emphasis on new parameters in education such as collaboration, personalization, as well as user-generated content. It is inevitable that this new generations of digital natives have certain expectations about the way they believe learning should be practiced and how it should evolve to have social media as an integral part of this learning process. With this fast growing and rapid change in the world of communication technologies, culture, pedagogy, and developments in knowledge, it is crucial for the teacher in this era to be familiar with such new educational changes, mainly those changes that relate to technology. However, change – as a social, cultural and educational process, can be accompanied by fear, and as a result, many teachers are reluctant to accept change (Fullan, 2006). Some teachers feel resistant to this change that keeps occurring rapidly in this digital age because they feel they are not becoming digital immigrants in this digital world (Prensky, 2001). With this reluctance to change, some teachers fear going through any change, and so they hold on to the traditional top-down teaching (Peterson, 1999). To consolidate a theory of resistance to what some teachers perceive as a 'hasty' and 'too rapid' of a change, they subconsciously formulate this perception that students might be neurologically, socially, and psychologically effected by the

overuse of technology Rosen (2010). Therefore, it is no doubt that we see this teaching-learning barrier which exists on one hand, between the students, being digital natives and eager to see technology being integrated in all aspects of their lives let alone their education, and the style of teaching that is being carried out by some teachers who are digital natives in the best case scenario and digital “ignorants” in the worst case scenario. The latter phenomenon is seen in many countries around the world and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is no different. A particular area of education that seen such a barrier, is the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) area where endless possibilities can be achieved successfully with appropriate pedagogical approaches where EFL learners’ skills can be greatly improved with the integration of social media technologies in English Language Learning (ELL). This study aims to explore perceptions of EFL teachers in using social media as an English Language Teaching (ELT) tool at university level and what prevents or hinders such utilization, as teachers perceive it.

1.2 Literature Review

In order to gain a deep understanding of this study, the review will first look at the political, social, religious, and educational systems in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In addition, this review will look at previous studies conducted to examine the current view of social media as an ELT tool among EFL teachers in the Saudi Context. The literature review will also focus on possible educational uses of some educational tools such as: Twitter, Facebook, emails, and YouTube.

1.2.1 The Saudi Context

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia holds high restrictions of both a political and a religious nature on different media forms, including the internet. Such restrictions contribute to the unique status of Saudi Arabia as the country with the most restrictions in the world. Samin (2008) stated that when “the Saudi government first made the Internet publicly available in 1999, its use has skyrocketed. The number of Saudi Internet users in the year 2000 totaled 200,000. By 2006, the number of users had increased to 2,540,000, constituting a 1,170% change” (p. 3). The Saudi citizens drew government attention, thus; the Saudi government developed one of the most extensive internet monitoring and censorship systems in existence. King Abdul Aziz Center for Science and Technology (KACST), the Riyadh-based state institution, which, as its president claimed, is a tool to protect the society, Muslim values, tradition, and culture (Black, 2009). Therefore, a number of sites have been blocked according to the Saudi Internet Services Unit (ISU). These blocked sites either contain pornographic and immoral contents or they contain issues that jeopardize the Islamic religion or the Saudi laws (Black, 2009). At this time, and with the relative calmness after the revolutionary wave of the Arab spring -a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East in early 2011 (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2014), Saudi media has changed some of its techniques in order to maintain the stability of the country. Saudi Arabia had to sacrifice something to look more democratic in its citizens’ eyes. Despite this freedom, Saudi Arabia official announced that social networking sites are now considered regulatory tools, which means that the government can now use offensive comments as evidences and they will be formally investigated (Yasmina, 2013). This can be seen in the Amnesty International public statement which states that, in 2012, Saudi authorities have expanded their repressive measures to arresting activists on social networking and sentencing them to prison (2013). Moreover, the statement indicated the following:

“The Saudi Arabian Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) requested from the internet service providers to take all needed steps to achieve security control over communications... [and] all service providers inform the authorities of the progress they have made in monitoring social media applications” (Amnesty International, 2013)

In fact, social media is controlled by the Saudi government, and that will have an impact on the way Saudis use, and to what degree they can benefit from these mediums.

1.2.2 Social Media

According to the Saudi Gazette website, a study has been released recently on social media in the Arab world. “According to the report, Saudis are the most active social media users in the Arab region, with an estimated 393,000 using Twitter and nearly four million using Facebook” (Fatany, 2012, p. 1). Saudis are taking advantage of the independence and freedoms offered through social media. There are simply too many Saudis around the world who are voraciously utilizing social media. They are not only using Facebook and Twitter, but also they equally enjoy YouTube. In 2012, The Communication and Information Technology Commission in Saudi Arabia conducted a field survey to identify the main reasons for using the internet in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The survey showed that the main reason for using the internet is to communicate with others, while the educational reasons came in the fifth place (CITC, 2012). Several empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of social

media websites in the classrooms. The positive effects that have been found that social media enhance the relationships and interaction between students and faculty, and students with peers, which in turn results in positive students' outcomes. It also helps in boosting student motivation (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). O'Sullivan, Hunt and Lippert (2004) found that a web site with multiple immediacy cues shaped perceptions of the communicator. A form of self-disclosure, willingness to be open, of teachers leads to higher level of anticipated motivation and affective learning of students, and gives positive attitudes about course content and instructor (Mazer et al., 2007; O'Sullivan et al., 2004). Some negative effects of social media on college students learning also occurred. Social media websites can make students isolated from peers and society. Excessive use of the Internet may withdraw students from other social involvement activities and create difficulty in maintaining real-life interpersonal relationships (Anderson, 2001). Furthermore, it can affect student well-being, as found in increases in refers to sleeping problems, depression, stress, health conditions, and illnesses, and decreases in self-esteem, (Anderson, 2001; Cotten, 2008). Although sometimes it may not impact college students' well-being directly, it can impact student self-concept, self-efficacy, and perceptions of their abilities in relation to technologies and college life (Cotten, 2008). In terms of academic outcome, it could affect students' grades (Scanlon & Neumann, 2002) and class completion (Anderson, 2001; Kuh et al., 2001). There is evidence of the misuse of the Internet by college students. Such misuse includes: cutting and pasting material into papers from websites without giving a credit to authors and purchasing term papers from online sources (Jones et al., 2008; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). Plagiarism has been a concern for the public and the educational field (Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). The significance of social media for university students is related to how these tools assist in the creation of learning communities. These learning communities work together to provide the new members with support and guidance, and moreover, to provide students with information and opportunities that they can use for their personal growth and development (Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009; Nagele, 2005). On a course delivery level, social media is used to enhance teaching and learning by providing students with academic support services, including mentoring, tutoring, and feedback (Rosen & Nilson, 2008). To control the benefits of these social media applications, universities had to look into implementing them in light of the best practices and well-developed strategies. Besides scattered recommendations, these practices and strategies are lacking in Middle Eastern universities. Current research highlights some suggested frameworks for implementing these media tools in education, and most empirical studies measure certain indicators of successful use of these applications. What is needed in the Saudi universities is more empirical studies, focusing on coming up with a strategy for using social media as an instructional and learning tool which encourages and supports students' collaboration (Shabrg, 2012). For this purpose, students' usage rates and satisfaction should be investigated on course and program levels and even on university level, as a large-scale learning community.

With the rapid rise of social media awareness amongst the youth and their engagement in public affairs and with the fact that Saudi Arabia ranks the number one on Twitter worldwide, having the most active users in the world (the socialclinic, 2013), it is important to exploit this interest and awareness to improve our educational system. As a matter of fact, the Senior Affairs and Educational Issues Ministry in Saudi Arabia has stated in a report that the poor use of the appropriate educational technology for each grade level will cause a lack of excitement in the educational process and the infiltration of boredom to teachers and students (Sultanah, 2012). That boredom and lack of excitement will have a negative impact on the Saudi education system and on the outcomes of this system.

1.2.3 Previous Studies in Language Learning and Teaching

Alshahrani and Al-Shehri (2012) investigated students' and teachers' understanding of and responses to integrated EFL e-learning tools such as Twitter. Using one university in Saudi Arabia for the setting of their study, the researchers found conceptions and practices of integrating e-learning were not aligned. Asiri and Alqarni (2015) explored the main advantages of using Twitter for EFL. The study presented the potential benefits of using Twitter as an educational tool among high school students in Jeddah, inside and outside their schools. The study showed a positive effect of Twitter in the learning and educational process especially on English language learning process. Ahmad (2015) investigated the effect of Twitter on EFL Saudi female writing and whether Twitter has an effect on: ideas and content, organization, voice and style. The researcher carried a pretest-posttest experimental-control group design on Saudi female students at Qassim University. Students in the experimental group were taught using Twitter and students in the control group were taught using the traditional method of teaching writing. Finally, students in both groups were post-tested using the EFL writing test. The study showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on post-testing of writing. This difference can be attributed to using Twitter in teaching writing. Kutbi (2015) conducted a study on how undergraduate female

students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Perceive the social media website Twitter as an educational Tool. The results of the study found that high percentage of the participants, 84%, prefer the use of Twitter as a learning tool. This high percentage proves that youth has a huge growing interest in technology. According to the Internet World Stats, 53% of Twitter users around the world are females and 77 % of them are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five (Internet World Stats, 2013).

Mahmoud (2013) investigated the effect of using email and face book on foundation year students' (FYS) achievement in EFL writing at King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU). The results showed that EFL students' writing performance gets better if they are taught writing using emails and face book. The social network sites added a special flavor to the writing class. First, the teaching/ learning environment is motivational and encouraging especially for the students who tend to be shy in the class. Second, English language is used outside the classroom which gives students more exposure and less stressful atmosphere. In addition, correction is made in a less embarrassing manner away from the red pen. The findings also show that students have positive attitude towards using SNSs for academic purposes. Such result encourages educators and teachers to use this technology whether in teacher strategies or in curriculum design. Kabouha (2015) conducted a study investigating the impacts of using YouTube videos on learning vocabulary in Saudi EFL classrooms. The results of the study showed that the students perceived YouTube video as a useful tool in learning English vocabulary (84% of the students found YouTube to be useful). They also considered it an easy technology to use (7% of the students found YouTube to be easy to use). This was also correlated with their attitude towards using YouTube for learning English vocabulary which was found to be positive as well. Alwagait, Shahzad, and Alim (2014) investigated the effect of excessive social media use on academic performance. Using universities in Saudi Arabia for the setting of the study, the researchers collected surveys from 108 students to discern social media platform popularity. They found "no linear relationship between social media usage in a week and GPA score" (p. 1092). They also found that instead, other factors such as time management were reported to negatively affect academic performance. However, Mahdi and El-Naim (2012) investigated what if any impact computer-mediated communication (CMC) had on EFL learner's interaction(s) when used informally—in the context of "unevaluated and unplanned activities which can occur outside the classroom and can be initiated by the students" (p. 75). In particular, the researchers conducted experiments with fifty adult EFL Saudi learners at Najran University, Saudi Arabia, using Facebook, to investigate the extent of active participation by students in informal CMC, the factors that facilitate effective informal CMC, and the effect of informal CMC on student written output. The researchers concluded that informal use of CMC can be affected by several factors include the degree of voluntary participation on the part of the learners, inhibitive schedules, and teacher interference, but that participant attitudes toward the use of informal CMC such as Facebook to improve language learning were mostly positive.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Do EFL teachers see any benefits in using social media in teaching English as a second language (L2)?
- 2) Do EFL teachers believe that the adoption of social media in EFL classrooms is an easily achievable task?
- 3) What are the main barriers that hinders the adoption of social media in EFL teaching at universities in Saudi Arabia?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Underpinned by a positivistic paradigmatic assumption, the main theoretical approach of this study is manifested in the descriptive and inferential statistical methods. This approach has been undertaken so as to target the quantitative data. This is due to the fact that providing description of a specific social or human phenomenon is more easily applicable than applying the experimental approach on humanities. The main tool used in the research has been through the use of a survey due to its efficiency in terms of cost, time and effort in studying the entire population (Ornstein, 2013).

2.2 Participants

For the sake of having an unbiased and a representative sample of the population, the researcher has selected to rely on a probability simple random sample (Blair, Czaja, & Blair, 2013) of 75 individuals ($n = 75$). There were 35 males and 40 female participants. All the participants work at two different Saudi universities in two different cities.

2.3 Survey Design

As mentioned earlier, the survey is comprised of a total of 14 items distributed into two parts. The first part has four nominal items which are: gender, age, qualifications and years of experience. The second part has 10 Likert Scale items with five likert-type responses ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Thus, the primary data was gathered using the survey (Singh & Mangat, 2013). The analysis of the primary data was immediately performed once all the participants completed the online questionnaire hosted on the website (www.surveymonkey.com). The primary data file that was downloaded from www.surveymonkey.com, was in Microsoft (MS) Excel® 2013 format and a carbon copy was made and entered into an SPSS® file format (.sav). Both files were kept secured and both files were utilized throughout the data analysis process. However, the bulk of the statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23® software.

2.4 Data Entry and Variable Coding

Following the collection of the data from the online survey, the gathered data were saved in an MS Excel® file format were they were then entered into a new SPSS data file (.sav) and all the variables were coded and labeled with their corresponding levels of measurements.

2.5 Demographic Data

Table 1 below illustrates the demographic representation of the participants with regards to their gender, age, yeats of experience and highest qualification attained.

Table 1. Demogrphaic data of the participants

Gender	Male	Female				
	35	40				
Age	25-30	31-36	37-42	43-49	50-56	> 56
	8	30	15	10	8	4
Years of Experience	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-21 years	>20 years	
	21	26	18	7	3	
Highest Qualification	Bachelor	Masters	Doctoral	Other		
	16	46	9	4		

It can be clearly seen that there were 53% female and 47% male participants. The table also indicates that the majority of the participants were between 31 and 36 years of age (47%). Most of the participants had 6-10 years of experience (35%) followed by 1-5 years of experience (28%) the by 11-15 years' experience (24%). The majority of the participants had a master degree qualification (61%) followed by bachelor degree (21%) and doctoral quaificaitons (12%) as well as other teaching qualificaitions (5%). The indication of diverse data among the participants gives a positive impression in that the participants have diverse background and experience as well as having different qualificaitions.

2.6 The Reliability of the Questionnaire Constructs using the Cronbach's Alpha

The initial stage of the statistical analysis was performed on the coded responses in the questionnaire using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Cronbach alpha is considered by many researchers as the most commonly used indicator of internal consistency (Franzen, 2013). It provides reliability estimates from the consistency of item responses from a single assessment. In addition, in statistics, Cronbach's (alpha) is used as an estimate of the reliability of a psychometric test (Coolican, 2014). The generally agreed upon lower limit for Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). The Cronbach alpha's calculated value of the raw data was 0.906. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for this study exceeded 0.9, thus satisfying the internal consistency requirements. See Table 2.

Table 2 The Cronbach's Alpha

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's lpha	N of Items
.906	10

3. Results

Due to the fact that data collected (barring the demographic one) was ordinal data and thus, descriptive statistics will not reflect accurately if applied to the direct recorded data (agree, disagree, neutral...etc). Thus, a representative reflective values were given to the responses of the participants where strongly agree was given a value of 5, agree was given a value of 4, neutral was given a value of Zero, disagree was given a value of 2 and strongly disagree was given a value of 1. Thus, it was applicable to carry our descriptive statistics and compare the responses of the participants. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the gathered data from the items 1-10.

Table 3. One Way ANOVA results from items 1-9

ANOVA		
	F	Sig.
I think social media does not have pedagogical value and should be used outside the EFL classroom only.	.100	.753
I believe that social media should be an essential part of the English language-teaching curriculum for university and college EFL learners.	.141	.708
I believe that social media is a very important in developing the writing skills of university and college EFL learners.	1.763	.188
I believe that using social media to teach English in the EFL classroom may lead some students to misuse it during the lesson.	4.013	.048
I believe that using social media is fun and full of pedagogical values.	3.584	.062
I believe that using social media in my EFL class can be time consuming.	1.229	.271
I believe that using social media can lower students' anxiety toward writing in English.	4.100	.330
I believe that social media is a highly motivating and entertaining way of teaching EFL, especially for university and college learners.	1.901	0.341
I believe that I can not measure students' knowledge of English when I use social media applications in my EFL classes.	0.588	0.143

Table 4. Calculated means of representative values of responses to items 1-9

Item	Total (Σx)	Mean (μ)
1	133	1.77
2	301	4.01
3	289	3.85
4	149	1.99
5	167	2.68
6	231	3.01
7	292	3.89
8	180	2.40
9	183	2.44

As can be seen from Table 3 above, the participants were in agreement in all the statements, barring item 4, and that is evident from the calculated p values which are >0.05 indicating no significant differences among the participants' responses except item 4 which has a p value of 0.048 (ie. <0.05) which indicates statistically significant difference in the responses of the participants. Furthermore, in table 4, the calculated means of the representative values of the responses of the participants indicate that the participants agree to statements 2,3,5,6,7,8 and 9 while they disagree with statements 1 and 4. Statements related to the lack of pedagogical value of social media which the participants did not agree on. Similarly, statement 4 relates to the misuse of social media by the students in the classroom which seems that the participants seem to slightly disagree (to a very

narrow extent) on.

Table 5. Data collected from item 10 in the questionnaire

What are the main barriers that hinders the adoption of social media in the EFL classrooms at your university:	Percentage (%)
Time – There is no time to adopt social media	29%
Content – Not enough suitable materials are available for adoption	8%
Curriculum – Social media is not integrated in the curriculum	14%
Distraciton – Fear of students misuing their mobile phones with social media (in the classroom)	39%
Internet/technical related issues	10%

From Table 5 above, it is evident that 39% of the EFL teachers who participated in this survey seem to believe that using social media on the mobile phones of the students in the EFL classroom seem to lead to some misues and distraiton by the students while 29% seem to believe that they do not have enough time to adopt social media in the classroom. To a lesser extent, 14% bleived that the curriculum designed by the institution does not seem to accommodate social media, 10% seem to believe that internet or technical issues may hinder the adoption of social media in the EFL classroom and 8% did not believe that there are suitable resources available for the adoption of social media in the EFL classroom.

4. Discussion

With the fast growing social media web sites globally, and with the increase in popularity of those web sites and mobile applications amongst the new generations, it is inevitable that learning will be affected one way or another. This study aimed to look at the perceptions of the EFL teachers of using social media as a pedagogical approach in teaching English as a second language (L2) and what are the factors that hinder such adoption. It is no doubt that teachers around the world undertand the impact of social media and the numerous advantages they can bring to the EFL classroom, especially the reading and writing skills. From the data anlaysis carried out on the respnses of the students, it seems that the participating EFL teachers do perceive social media as a vital pedagogical tool in the EFL classroom. However, there seems to be a suconconscious barred hindering the adoption of this important tool and that is the fear of misuse or distraction it may cause among some students eventhough some teachers do not perceive it that way. Additionally, there seems to be this widespread belief that current curriculums do not accommodate social media in the taught materials (e.g. textbooks). An important factor that also hinders the adoption of social media in the EFL classrooms in the Saudi context as per the responses of the participant in this study is time. Time can be a big obstacle for EFL teachers at tertiary institutions in Saudi Arabia and that is due to the short smeesters (modular semsters) and the impracticality of the adoption of any extra activities in the classroom.

5. Recommendation

This short study can be expanded further to include more participants from different universities in Saudi Arabia. It would be recommended to expand the actual survey and include more items to explore the perceptions of teachers over a wide platform of opinions and beelifs.

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