

Learning for Fun: Strategies for Social Networking-Based Language Learning

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Abstract

Technology-mediated sociocultural practice requires the dynamic interplay of learner-users' roles, learning contexts and technology tools. The behavioral intentions of users interact with the perceived features of these tools in enabling up-to-date *personal* experiences of leisure learning and social networking available online. The aim of this article is to explore the current perceptions among Malaysian university students about their daily learning strategies of English as a Second Language (ESL) via social networking. It initially makes use of the online surveys (quantitative self-reported questionnaire) that have been administered to final year Malaysian university students, ESL learners' population of approximately 500 students. The result shows that there is obvious potential within these new media resources to empower Malaysian ESL learners with authentic learning potentials such as to communicate, practice and rehearse through the multiple identities and learning strategies they adopt in the virtual environment.

Keywords: Learning strategies; ESL learning; Social networking tools; Sociocultural approach.



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1. Introduction

Extensive empirical research has been conducted in the field of online learning tools and learning strategies (Chamot, 2005; Hoy, 2011; Macaro, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). For example, social networking tools offer an interactive learning environment by challenging students to receive support for their learning (Cho *et al.*, 2009; Emerson and MacKay, 2011). Another interesting research that related to experiential learning suggested that learning does not emerge just in the classroom but that it is what has happened outside the formal classroom in learners' everyday lives that has the greatest impact (Sefton-Green, 2004; Selwyn, 2007). There is the possibility, therefore, that some learners prefer and concentrate more on informal language acquisition, especially those who are more independent and self-motivated, and this might affect their perceived learning affordances and strategies. In order to address this inquiry, the researcher views the Malaysian university students as ESL learners from generally a sociocultural perspective and, more specifically, through an activity theory lens. Reinartz (2009), describes activity theory in relation to social networking practices:

To access these dynamic, collaborative, and contributory processes, Activity Theory provides a useful lens to better analyse and describe the complexity of learners in action with others and with media while proceeding on their learning trajectories. Moreover, social networking tools and practices associated with them allow [learners] to engage in tensions that are centred on content-related challenges while generating new social-action genres and practices. (p. 140)

Accordingly, in the current article, the approach to taking context into account is founded on a sociocultural perspective. The central study object in the current investigation is the use of social networking tools as learning resources. The article has proposed to study learning as "activity"; it is the learners' engagement with learning resources that is important for the investigation. This is consistent with a system focus on the relationship between intended and actual use of artifacts (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). A sociocultural gives priority to study of social networking tools in use and focuses on learner-user interpretations and meanings, situated in the context (Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Reinartz, 2009), of the social networking-based ESL activities outside the formal classroom. Thus, this leisure learning trend that enables technologically-mediated authentic opportunities of natural extensions of the classroom learning is important as it is also a development towards a more holistic picture of learning. It is therefore important to examine what, why and how learner-users might be able to do with the tools available to them.

2. Research Background in Web-based Language Learning Strategies

There is emerging confirmation from scholars that web technologies have evolved historically through the powerful development of learning resources with unique functions such as communicating, storing and integrating different technologies (Ebner *et al.*, 2009; Freishtat, 2009; Murray and Hourigan, 2010; Warschauer, 2007). These provide useful leads to conceptualize how Malaysian ESL students use the tools for their leisure learning beyond the classroom. Yet, there still appears to be discussion about what strategies and methods are appropriate to language learners and how they should be categorized and measured (Chamot, 2005; Macaro, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). In fact, there is a current lack of research on learner-users' strategies in participating in social networking. What does seem clear, however, is that the studies of language learning strategies often bring up the concept of the good language learner. For example, Chamot (2005), refers to the good language learner as "one who is a mentally active learner, monitors language comprehension and production, practices communicating in the language, makes use of

prior linguistic and general knowledge, uses various memorization techniques, and asks questions for clarification” (p. 115). He recommends, along with others in the field that examining the types of strategies good language learners use would be a potential help to all language learners to become more dynamic (Chamot, 2005; Macaro, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). Language learners who discover various learning strategies are able to decide the best strategies for their own practice (Chamot, 2005; Hoy, 2011; Macaro, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000).

Learning strategies are the conscious beliefs and actions that learners set up to aid the progress of their learning. Advanced learners have a metacognitive strategy of monitoring their learning methods, are alert to demanded tasks, and have the capacity to adopt strategies to own their learning (Chamot, 2005; Macaro, 2001). Anderson (2003) states that metacognition “is the ability to reflect on what you know and do and what you do not know and do not do” (p. 10). This cognitive perspective contributes to an understanding of sociocultural learning in terms of reflection on practices. It provides a complementary lens to identify trends and patterns of engagement with social networking tools, and to indicate their usefulness for daily learning.

The adapted OSORS (Anderson, 2003), consisted of 38 items that are valuable to measure learning strategies. The most interesting aspect of the strategy, providing support to the category of informal learning strategies of ESL in the present study, is the concept of metacognition. The importance of metacognition in personal language learning has been clarified by the researchers. For instance, learners who are metacognitively aware know what to do when they have problems because they have strategies for independently figuring out what they need to do (Anderson, 2003; Chamot, 2005; Zimmerman, 2000). Importantly, Anderson (2003), proposes that metacognition can be divided into five primary components. In this sense, it is the blending of all five into a combined view that may be the most accurate representation of metacognition. The use of metacognitive strategies ignites learners’ thinking and can lead to deeper learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are struggling (Anderson, 2003; Chamot, 2005; Macaro, 2001).

In the context of this study, interactive social networking tools in the sociocultural learning environment play a role to support learning by reflecting all five primary components of metacognition as suggested by Anderson (2003). Consequently, learners do not learn solely from engaging with social networking technology, but they also learn through thinking and reflecting as they must perceive and evaluate their strategies of social networking-based ESL learning beyond the classroom. Reflections about their own and others’ sociocultural learning experiences and beliefs are important in order to construct their knowledge about their own informal learning. Therefore, web technological tools may be employed as enablers and motivators of thinking and knowledge building for empowering learner-users to be independent in their own language learning (Boruta *et al.*, 2011; Feng, 2009; Gardner, 2011; Gee, 2010).

3. Method

The quantitative data is collected from individual learner-users engaging in ESL learning mediated by social networking tools beyond the classroom. Self-report questionnaires were used to generate quantitative data from the university student population (N= 500). The questionnaires focused on how the social networking tools have been utilized by university students for their ESL learning outside the classroom by drawing on the past research literature. The self-reported questionnaires for the adapted questions on perceived learning strategies for leisure learning of ESL were adapted from Anderson (2003), previously used survey questions. By using Likert scales, the numeric data from the survey included responses to items that measured students’ online learning strategies. In order to ensure anonymity in the interests of frank responses, respondents did not provide their name and were assured in the accompanying letter that their answers were totally confidential.

The online survey data were analysed through statistical methods including descriptive analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics are used to organize, summarize and describe the responses of the participants. This helps the researcher to present quantitatively the current trends of learners’ strategies used in socially and culturally mediated leisure learning activities via social media.

4. Discussion

The quantitative data of this study showed that the students expressed strong positive experiences and perceptions towards learning strategies with social networking tools towards their English learning beyond the classroom. The strategy statement that gained the highest rating was “having a purpose in mind when learning online” (91% of them agreed). However, the statement that gained the lowest rating was “printing out a hard copy of the online material then underlining or circling information to help [them] remember it” (71.6% of participants agreed). Overall, the quantitative data had shown the agreement level with each of the statements following of the preferred learning strategies by average, (84.3% of respondents) stated that they strongly agreed and were positive towards learning strategies with social networking tools towards their English informal learning.

This is in line with the findings from the questionnaire responses; the majority of participants in the focus group interviews perceived that social networking tools had strongly impacted their learning strategies. From the qualitative data, it seems that social networking-based informal learning strategies of ESL in activity theory framework centers on activities, goals, tools and the outcomes of those activities towards meaningful learning practices (Reinartz, 2009). The shared experience among Malaysian university students who use social networking tools for their English learning outside the formal classroom indicates a preference for the use of three main categories of learning strategies, namely social networking tool-mediated, community-mediated and role-mediated strategies as shown in Figure 1.0 as follows:

Figure-1. Social Networking-based Language Learning Strategies

4.1. Social Networking Tool-Mediated Strategy use

According to [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#), tools are the social mediators of learning. In the current study, the relationship between the learner (subject) and the leisure learning of ESL (object) is always mediated through the use of social networking tools and cognitive resources. It indicates that learner-users are actually consciously using these tools with which they are familiar ([Boudreaux, 2010](#); [Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005](#)), because they can recognize and articulate the value of the properties as generative resources for their daily ESL learning. The perceived learning strategies of the respondents for ESL learning purposes beyond the classroom are reported as follows:

Facebook. Respondents stated that Facebook as the most popular and meaningful tool for their ESL enhancement. They would follow the general rules of English when using Facebook. Compatible with [Selwyn \(2007\)](#), the findings indicate that Facebook was an important social tool used by the majority of the respondents to aid their life in university. For instance, for making new online friendships, staying in touch and collaborating with each other.

Online dictionary/translator. Respondents perceived this tool as beneficial in facilitating their language understanding, for example, to check the meaning, translation, spelling, and pronunciation of words.

E-mail. Respondents expressed that while using this asynchronous tool they were using certain strategies such as the practice of writing in the right context, “spelling,” and good style all the times. They would also “spend some time thinking” and “proof-reading” their messages before sending. In terms of communicative strategies, a significant other support individual learners to re-evaluate what they are doing and thinking ([Chamot, 2005](#); [Zimmerman, 2000](#)). Though e-mails presented mainly in a text-based form, they could be used for their ESL learning resources. The understanding of each e-mail is negotiated between the e-mail sender and the recipient. This interactive characteristic of e-mail made it somehow similar to face-to-face communication, yet it retained its asynchronous nature and allowed writers to compose and send it “at their convenience”.

Games. The findings of this study show this popular strategy was inspiring because they were having “fun” while they “make friends” and communicate with others in English through games. This point supports the findings in the literature that the learners engage in critical thinking and problem-solving across the technology affordances ([Dunleavy et al., 2008](#); [Lenhart and Madden, 2005](#); [Mortimer, 2010](#); [Woo et al., 2011](#)). This evidence also confirms [Muehleisen \(1997\)](#), and [Gardner \(2011\)](#), findings that the excitement of curiosity could also keep the (leisure learning) activity of ESL intrinsically motivating through the use of interactive web tools.

YouTube. In order to have input from “native speakers” for leisure ESL learning, the respondents preferred watching movies and varieties of audiovisual resources via YouTube. YouTube could provide them with “good models” of speaking English in terms of native “accent, speed and intonation”. This finding has shown that bringing more voices into open web technologies by encompassing leisure dialogues into realms of public deliberation are perceived as important for knowledge construction in communities ([Dietel-McLaughlin, 2010](#); [Selwyn, 2007;2008](#)).

Online_News. Most of the subjects mentioned reading and watching the online news to advance their English such as *The Star*, *The Times*, *NST*, *BBC*, and *CNN*. A promising result for language learners is that social networking tools provide unique opportunities ([Feng, 2009](#); [Murray and Hourigan, 2010](#)), for “indirect”, interesting, “effortless” and effective learning, in the authentic and novel learning environments where learning ESL is for everyone. For instance, they could use interactive “audiovisual” elements to improve their “communicative competence” and knowledge about the “current issues” by listening to the “reporters” who use “formal”, “authentic” English.

Wiki. Another important strategy is practicing and rehearsing ESL skills through Wiki. Wikis allowed for collective editing of online documents and promptly correcting errors when perceived ([Shihab, 2008](#); [Tapscott, 2009](#); [Weinstein et al., 2005](#)). The finding of this study also indicates that participants were collaborating and depending on other learners’ participation before they (themselves) could take part in Wiki discussions.

Skype. The respondents reported that the advantages of speaking to native speakers via Skype are crucial in terms of enhancing their integrated skills like pronunciation, speaking and listening. They found that beyond the classroom, they have learned some authentic practices used by the native speakers in their Skype interaction such as “what words can be used when [they are] angry” and when they want to “praise someone”.

Website. Due to the vast array of websites available, most respondents would select resources on the social networking tools by “browsing” and “skimming”, using “Google”, keyword searches and “guessing the meaning

from the contexts". As stated by the participants, they also printed some important learning materials so information was "readily accessible" and to make their own notes. As recommended by [Anderson \(2003\)](#), it is important to examine on the possible contrasts or similarities between these two reading contexts because "we cannot assume a simple transfer of L2 reading skills and strategies from the hardcopy environment to the online environment" (p.5).

Blog. A blog allows participants to practice writing online at "anytime, anywhere and with anybody". As repetition can be a "good memory" aid, practicing writing via blogs enables better storage in memory for easier usage in the future towards virtual community building and ESL motivation enhancement. These results corroborated Lantolf and Thorne's description that "language [learning is] concerned with enhancing learners' communicative resources that are formed and reformed in the very activity in which they are used-concrete, linguistically mediated social and intellectual activity" (2006, p. 6).

4.2. Community-Mediated Strategy

When participants use community-mediated strategies, they were often thinking about interaction towards their language learning and working with other people to learn via social networking tools. As suggested by [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#), and [Kaptelinin and Nardi \(2006\)](#), communities of practice most likely have histories, cultural identities, interdependence among members and mechanism for reproduction. In this study, participants reported discussing and exchanging ideas outside of the classroom and these were influenced by others too especially from their social activities with other social networking users online. From an activity theory perspective, the shared experiential learning space of social networking tools can generate "innovative attempts to change activities and be used as a catalyst for growth" ([Engeström, 2001](#)). Presumably, most of the subjects believed they should be "open-minded" and "keep the spirit of learning" among each other. Perhaps, sometimes this strategy made them "tense and caused them to try to kill each other with words". But finally, they would know that they should "learn from each other". Thus, social interaction within communities was meaningful to the participants. This leads to the next theme that emerged from this study: role-mediated strategies.

4.3. Role-Mediated Strategies

As informed by the participants, social networking provides support in whatever role they want to take up, for example, to actively determine how, why, when and where they learn ESL and how they are perceived in communities. As [Gee \(2010\)](#), suggests, what motivates learner-users to participate in social networking activities is that they are able to take on various social roles. Learners are also aware of the powerful effects of social networking that allow fine-tuning of projected roles (demonstrate different aspects of themselves and develop good online practices with others) in shaping their ESL learning in the social networking-based community beyond the classroom. There were a few types of role-mediated strategies found in the participants' data, namely learning managers (self-learners), ESL learners, final year university students and future TESL teachers. In looking at Malaysian university students' literacy practices and identities, this study strives to better understand that, as they transformed the learning object into an outcome, they present multiple senses of identity as contexts change in ESL learning and strategies. For instance, participants' profiles on Facebook exposed a good deal of precise confidential and unique information in self-learning and self-presentation within an open context. This factor is quite important because the role-play is normally dependent on who they are communicating with. As shown by the data, much more leisure interaction occurred when participants were communicating with equal peers. However, the conversation is more formal when they communicating with higher order co-participants (e.g. lecturers).

These findings strengthen the work of others who promote developing online learning as a medium to shape and influence the learning context to engage learners in deeper and more meaningful learning processes ([Anderson, 2003](#); [Antenos-Conforti, 2009](#); [Emerson and MacKay, 2011](#); [Greenhow and Robelia, 2009](#)). In a learning community, individual and collective knowledge growths mutually shape each other with a focus on achieving or furthering learning outcomes. This study lends support to the concern that social networking-based experiential learning communities are productive for promoting the voiced spirit of an open, shared practice ([Dietel-McLaughlin, 2010](#); [Freishtat, 2009](#); [Jenkins et al., 2006](#); [Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005](#)). The value to this finding rested with the understanding that giving learners choices and valuing their preferences through these activities likely influenced learners' mindfulness of learning ([Antenos-Conforti, 2009](#)). Therefore, social networking media has enabled students to adopt new learning behaviors, cooperative "trial and error" practice ([Brown, 2006](#); [Duke, 2010](#); [Starkey, 2010](#); [Ullrich et al., 2008](#)), mutual engagement and responsibilities consistent with the realities of a rapidly changing of virtual community.

5. Conclusion

The study on students' preferred learning strategies has shown the importance of social practices such as negotiating meanings and building up knowledge among the learners. In other words, learners demonstrated that they collaborated with other learners to achieve their learning objectives in managing their individual learning through social networking activities. This finding implies that learners need assistance mediated by negotiation of meanings with the more capable person in order to improve their ESL competence. This confirms the sociocultural concept of learning, demonstrating that learning is not an individual process alone, but is a collaborative effort necessarily involving other individuals ([Kaptelinin and Nardi, 2006](#); [Lantolf and Thorne, 2006](#); [Vygotsky, 1978](#)). As a consequence, social networking mechanisms support students to reflect on their personal learning tasks. In addition, these promising learning tools provide an environment in which learner-users could interact in real and

deferred time and thereby accommodate positive effects on learning behaviors. Such learning strategies among the learner-users are summarized in the following Table 1.0:

Table-1. Preferred online learning strategies

Preferred Online Learning Strategies	
Social	Personal
Communicate with: i) Other learners ii) Native speakers	Set purpose in mind.
Use references.	Take notes.
Use tables, figures & pictures.	Think about content, rethink & check to understand.
Use context clues.	Print out & underline.
Use L2 & L1.	Paraphrase.
Practice: i) Sounds ii) Watching iii) Use many ways	Relate ideas.
Publish ideas online.	Re-read.
Voice opinions.	Guess meaning.
Get more ideas about learning.	Distinguish between facts and opinions.

In sum, there are some ways, as reported by learners that they were involved in learning strategies for social networking-based informal learning of ESL. The interplay of intentions and perceived capacities of the technologies offer opportunities for engagement with social networking among Malaysian university students in terms of learning strategies for their ESL practices outside the classroom. For that reason, the stakeholders within the educational system namely the parents, educators, and students should be aware of the potential of social networking tools such as Facebook and YouTube as part of educational offerings and opportunities. As noted by many researchers (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009; Tapscott, 2009; Warschauer, 2007), the reality is that formal curricula will not be completely adequate to include all aspects of twenty-first-century education. In view of that, much time and planning should be devoted to identifying activities that engage students in developing lifelong learning and career skills, as well as information and technology skills.

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