USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE EFL CLASSROOM FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF LOW AFFECTIVE FILTER AND WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

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Abstract

The use of social media is becoming to influence all domains of education, including the field of foreign/second language (L2) learning. In the area of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), in particular, social media tools have been found to offer great promise for language learning. However, consistent efforts to examine the use of social media in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms and how it can impact learners' affective variables remain scarce. In this study, the emphasis was placed on the use of social media and affective benefits which were hypothesized to influence learners' willingness to communicate in L2. Forty learners of two 15-week language courses at a university in Thailand participated. They were asked to engage in one type of social media, Instagram, posting pictures of what they did during class time and reflecting on their learning experience in English. Questionnaires were administered and a follow-up interview was conducted for the evidence of the impact social media had on learners' emotional state. While the first phase of the investigation had yielded favourable findings, some of the findings from the second phase reported here also reaffirmed the usefulness of social media for lowering affective filter while increasing the level of willingness to communicate as a consequence.

1 Introduction

Certain emotions, such as high anxiety, low motivation, low self-confidence, boredom, and frustration are examples of affective variables generally regarded as negative psychological factors which act like a filter interfering with learners' language acquisition process. Krashen (1981) poses that low affective filter (i.e. the condition when learners have high motivation, positive attitude, high self-confidence, and low anxiety) is necessary for language acquisition to take place. While some language learners naturally have low affective filter, others appear to come to their classes with various filter. In Thailand, in particular, this issue is evident since Thai EFL learners appear to feel anxious about English learning and communicating (Bunrueng, 2008; Tasee, 2009); lack confidence in their speaking skills (Boonkit, 2010; Grubbs, Chaengploy, & Worawong, 2009); have low motivation to participate in English (Maneekhao & Tepsuriwong, 2009); feel shy to use English (Wiriyachitra, 2001); and feel unwilling to communicate in English (Kamprasertwong, 2010; Pattapong, 2013; Wattana, 2013). Undoubtedly, this can have a significant impact on learners' language acquisition and communicative competence. Positive emotional variables are likely to have a strong influence on willingness to participate in communicative tasks using foreign/second language (L2) (MacIntyre, Clément, & Noels, 2007). Literature suggests that learners who feel less anxious, more confident, more motivated, and more competent are likely to show greater willingness

to use L2. When learners are willing to communicate with others using L2, it is possible that they will learn the language because they have a chance to use it.

Since affective filter is a facilitating factor in second language acquisition (SLA), attempts should be made to lower learners' negative emotional state and let them feel more willing to use L2. Theoretically speaking, affective filler can be lowered and willingness to communicate can be raised as a result of relaxing environments. Due to a profound impact of the role of technology in encouraging such environments, in this study, I considered the use of social media as a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) activity for encouraging low affective filter and increased levels of willingness to communicate among Thai EFL learners. To date, this effort is hardly made and reported in Thailand.

2   Social Media for Language Learning

Social media is the tool that can allow individuals to participate in, comment on, and share various media such as texts, images and video and audio recordings as means of communicating with other users online. When applied to language learning, a wide range of social media, including blogs (e.g. WordPress), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), Microblogs (e.g. Twitter), Wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), Video Podcasts, RSS Feeds, virtual worlds (e.g. online games), and Photo sharing (e.g. Instagram), means that ample opportunities to improve language learning will be provided to language learners (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Brick, 2011; Forlano, 2009; Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Lomika & Lord, 2009; Meskill & Quah, 2012; Mills, 2011; Stevenson & Liu, 2010).

When supplementing traditional reading and writing courses, social media has been showed to present pedagogical potential for improving language awareness, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency (Wu & Wu, 2011), developing language competence (Dieu, 2004), and offering learners increased opportunities for language skill practice (Lee, 2010). In addition, when implementing for communicative skill development, a number of studies revealed that certain types of social media allowed learners to interact with others using L2 (Thorne, 2009; Toetenel, 2014). In Toetenel's (2014) study, the author examined the use of social networking site *Ning* in class to promote informal language practice. *Ning* sessions were carried out with 15 foreign college students in the UK for an hour a day for a two-week period. Students were asked to update statuses, post comments, respond to their friends, keep diaries, and complete two sets of questionnaires. The study showed that using *Ning* in the classroom helped enhance group cohesion, learner-learner interactions, and informal language learning. Also, social media has been investigated for their effects on affective variables and constantly showed favourable outcome. Overall, previous studies found that social media technologies could lower learners' affective barriers by allowing language learners to use L2 with more confidence (Thorne, 2009; Wu & Wu, 2011), increased motivation (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lee, 2010), reduced anxiety (Stevenson & Liu, 2010), decreased shyness (Bosch, 2009), and positive attitudes towards language learning (Thorne, 2009; Toetenel, 2014). These positive emotional variables are hypothesized to influence learners' willingness to communicate in L2 (MacIntyre et al., 2007).

3   Willingness to communicate

Willingness to communication is defined as an individual's 'readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2' (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998, p. 547). An increase in willingness to communicate is important to SLA (Ellis, 2004) and L2 communication (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004) since the construct is regarded as a final step before actual L2 use (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Dörnyei (2003) points out that learners need to be both *able* and *willing* to use their L2. Accordingly, communicative instruction should be integrated with opportunities to increase learners' willingness to communicate, and the encouragement of willingness to communicate should be, thus, one of the fundamental goals of L2 pedagogy (Dörnyei, 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Research (e.g. Aubrey, 2011; Cao, 2006; Kang, 2005; Noon-ura, 2008; Pattapong, 2013; Wang, 2011) have revealed particular strategies teachers can employ to help their learners to become more willing to use L2. An important technique is to integrate technology into teaching and learning processes because it appears to have a vital role to play in encouraging learners to feel free to use L2 (Reinders & Wattana, 2014). It is noticeable that interactive features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools have considerably prompted CALL studies aiming to enhance learners' willingness to communicate and actual use of L2. CMC in the form of online games, particularly 'massively multiplayer online role-playing games' (MMORPGs), have been recently examined, showing their potential benefits in lowering affective filter and fostering certain variables influencing willingness to communicate because of their key features and characteristics (deHaan, 2005; Peterson, 2010, 2011, 2012; Zhao & Lai, 2009). This is evident in an empirical study (Wattana, 2013) investigating the integration of commercial MMORPG *Ragnarok Online* into a Thai EFL class, and the effects gameplay had on language learners' interaction and willingness to communicate in English. Thirty university students participated and engaged in six computer game sessions in a 15-week semester. Their interaction during gameplay was monitored through the chat history and their willingness to communicate was measured through questionnaires, actual interaction during gameplay, and interviews. Their increased confidence, low anxiety, positive communicative experience, and remarkably increased L2 use during gameplay led the author to conclude that digital games had potential to improve levels of willingness to communicate in English among Thai EFL learners.

Although previous studies have revealed benefits of the use of social media for improving language skills and lowing affective filter, there seem to be no significant and consistent efforts examining the use of social media in language learning (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Toetenel, 2014). More empirical research is still required to determine the impact social media has on other aspects of language acquisition, especially willingness to communicate which is also an important learner affect (Reinders & Wattana, 2015). The potential of social media for language learning has been generally recognised in previous CALL research. Underlying this study was therefore the hypothesis that social media could have possibility for encouraging low affective filter, especially in terms of feelings about L2 communication, which could, in turn, affect learners' willingness to communicate.

4   Methodology

The research question was: How do Thai EFL learners feel about communicating in English in social media?

Social media was implemented in this study as a CALL activity. The focus was on one social media genre, Instagram, which was employed as a means to give participants opportunities to reflect on their language learning experience and to encourage them to use English outside the classroom and, in turn, enhance their willingness to use the language. Participants had to take pictures of what they did in class, share them with a post of their learning experience, and interact with the teacher's and their friends' comments using English. The use of social media in this study was influenced by the 'affective filter hypothesis' proposed by Krashen (1981). According to this hypothesis, psychological variables play an important role in language acquisition. If learners have high motivation, positive attitude, high self-confidence, and low anxiety, for example, the affective filter is low and thus they are more likely to be successful in language acquisition. Social media has been recognized in the literature to provide a low stress atmosphere, helping learners feel relaxed and motivated to use L2 (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Lloyd, 2012; Wattana, 2013). The use of social media was thus expected to facilitate lowering of the affective filter and subsequently promote more communication and opportunities for learners to become willing to use L2. In addition, social media was implemented in this study on the basis of 'willingness to communicate' (MacIntyre et al., 1998) perspective arguing that enhancing learners' willingness to communicate should be a fundamental goal of L2 education (Dörnyei, 2001; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

The study focused on feelings about communication in English in terms of communicative self-confidence (i.e. combination of low anxiety about communication and sufficient self-perceived communicative competence). Moreover, willingness to communicate was operationally defined in this study as an "individual's readiness to engage in communication in the target language at a particular moment and situation", and it was measured in terms of language learners' perceptions of willingness to engage in English communication. In order to answer the research question, participants' feelings about communication in English and their willingness to communicate were measured using questionnaires and a semi-structured face-to-face interview. Both the questionnaire items and interview questions were adapted from Wattana's (2013) study, thus ensuring content validity. The study was carried out with a pre-test-post-test structure and a follow-up component in one intact EFL class involving 40 Thai EFL students enrolled in two 15-week university language courses which were designed and taught by me. The study was thus carried out during a 30-week period of one academic year. The first phase was conducted in the first semester involving the discovery of how participants generally felt about their communication in English inside the language classroom; the engagement of participants in social media throughout the course (i.e. 15 weeks); the measurement of their feelings about their communication in English in social media; and the comparison between their feelings to interact in both settings to examine the intervention effects on learners' affective filter. The second phase was conducted in the second semester as a follow-up study in which the same participants were engaged in the same social media throughout the course (i.e. 15 weeks). After the final social media participation of the second phase (i.e. week 30), all the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. The interview was held as a follow-up investigation after the completion of social media participation with three students (two males and one female) who voluntarily agreed to participate after a full explanation of the present study had been given. The interview took approximately 30 minutes and involved asking participants to describe their feelings about communication and perceptions of willingness to interact in English in social media.

The reason behind this follow-up investigation was to ascertain whether there were long-term effects of social media on learners' affective filter and willingness to communicate. The first phase of the investigation had yielded favorable findings: participants felt more confident to communicate in English, felt more positive about their willingness to use the target language, and reported that they had produced target language output more frequently in social media than they did during class time (see Chotipaktanasook, 2014). Similar findings were confirmed in a follow-up study, indicating that social media had a significantly positive impact on learners' willingness to communicate (see Chotipaktanasook & Reinders, in press). Only the interview findings of the second phase are reported here.

5   Findings

When asked how the three volunteer participants felt when it came to using English to reflect on their learning through social media and how willing they were to use English, all reported positive feelings. This suggests that social media could help lower affective filter and, in turn, enhance their willingness to communicate. Generally, all the three respondents claimed that they liked using social media because it allowed them to actively engage with the teacher and other students using English, despite their low language proficiency. One interviewee stated that social media promoted natural interaction and encouraged active communicative exchange. Likewise, another interviewee reported that he had waited for the comments so that he could take the opportunity to give his responses in English. He noted that "When I posted pictures and my learning experiences, I really looked forward to my teacher's and friends' comments and likes. I enjoyed reading the comments and I felt I was motivated to use English to interact with them and provide more immediate responses". Another interviewee stated that she liked it when she had live audience to share and interact with. She maintained that "this helped improve my motivation". Additionally, all the three interviewees felt that social media provided them with opportunities to talk about their learning experiences in a meaningful way and to communicate in English beyond the classroom. "I had opportunities to practise and use English for real purposes and with authentic audience. This is a big help for building my confidence in communicating in English", one interviewee claimed.

All the three interview respondents also reported that they enjoyed interacting with one another in social media using English because they could communicate freely. Although they felt nervous about whether the teacher and other students could understand their English, they began to feel relieved that they could use English to communicate more of their learning experience, comments, and responses. Interestingly, all the interviewees gave very similar comments: "It was fun to use English to communicate with others in social media. I was generally motivated to use English because I could use simple language which was sufficient for my [language proficiency] level and the use in daily lives".
All the three interviewees indicated that the enjoyment experienced in social media made them highly willing to use English. One interviewee said that "I felt that I liked experimenting with the way I used English in social media. I wished I could have this feeling in class". Similarly, the majority reported their high degree of willingness to use English in social media to reflect on their learning, reply to their teacher's and friends' comments both about their learning experience, in particular, and other personal matters, in general. One interviewee asserted that she was motivated to use English in other social media sites and

keen on using the language to socialize and communicate with people from anywhere around the world.

While having fun, the majority indicated that they were also able to learn English in an informal way and, at the same time, improve their communicative abilities. One interviewee stated that he improved his writing skills through composing various authentic messages, and developed his reading skills through reading meaningful sources such as responses and picture captions in English. This variety means that he could also learn new words. Another interviewee commented: "After interacting in social media for a period time, I felt pretty competent because I could reply each comment in English quickly and without thinking".

6 Conclusion and Discussion

Overall, the qualitative findings have revealed Thai EFL learners' positive feelings about communicating in English in social media. Like previous CALL research (e.g. Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Li, Liu, & Boyer, 2009; Peterson, 2010; Warschauer, 1996; Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, 2009), this study showed that affective filter can be lowered as a result of engaging in online environments. Thai EFL learners in this study reported that they felt relaxed, competent, and confident about using English in social media. This can consequently lead to an increased level of willingness to communicate (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Clément et al., 2003). All the three interviewees acknowledged that communicating in English in social media made them feel more comfortable while enhancing their willingness to try and use the target language simultaneously.

Learners' positive feelings could be mainly due to the key characteristic of online interaction in providing a less stressful environment where accuracy and complexity of the language are not necessary (Wattana, 2013). Moreover, increased competence in their English when interacting in social media could be caused by meaningful comments from their live audiences. In this situation, using English for real audiences and purposes might show learners the value of the use the target language and help them gain competence. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), learners who perceive their communicative competence as 'high' are likely to develop their confidence in L2 use, and, in turn, exhibit a high level of willingness to communicate.

My findings have also reflected that it was not just about lowered affective filter but also how social media could subsequently help language learners to become willing to communicate in English. Since learning English involves much more than studying in the classroom, language teachers are encouraged to turn social media into language development opportunities.

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