

Article

Social Networking for EAP students

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ABSTRACT

For many international students, moving to a new country for higher education poses not only language challenges but also lifestyle changes. This paper addresses the question of whether a social networking site (Edmodo) can help pre-sessional EAP students integrate into British life and study. A cohort of 52 pre-sessional students used the site over a three month period to post comments, share links, and reply to queries. Of the 446 posts made, the majority related to settling in issues such as accommodation, entertainment, and local transport. Findings revealed 92% of the participants intended to continue using the site during their university studies; citing the site's accessibility and informality as key positives. At an institutional level, this study suggests English Language Centres could use social media to connect international students to each other as well as to the wider university community both before arriving to the UK and after finishing pre-sessional courses.

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Introduction

Recent studies on international students in the UK have highlighted the challenges in both study and lifestyle (e.g. Huang, 2012, Brown and Holloway, 2008). For many, it is a time of several firsts; their first time living abroad, their first English speaking environment, and the first time away from family and friends. To assist with these anxieties, it seems many universities provide a range of services, all focused on helping international students integrate into UK HE. Services such as buddy programmes (Eseonu et al. 2011), orientation weeks (Dunne, 2009), and international societies (Coles and Swami, 2012) have all been recommended in research as useful provisions for international students.

Nevertheless, in spite of these services, it appears from first-hand experience on UK HE Pre-sessional programmes that many of these international students continue to direct their concerns to their tutors. Queries regarding visas, banking, accommodation, and how to make new friends, seem to be frequently directed to the teacher rather than the university's provisions.

Social Networking: A possible solution

In addition to these non-curricular queries, and again from first-hand experience, a second commonality amongst many of these international students appears to be the possession of a mobile device and an interest in social networking. With this in mind, this study aimed to combine these two classroom observations by proposing the following research question: Could a social networking site help pre-sessional EAP students integrate into living and studying in the UK?

Recent research on social networking sites (SNS) and their uses within education suggest they are playing an increasingly prominent and diverse role. At an institutional level, SNS such as Facebook and Twitter are often used as marketing and communication tools (e.g. Moran, et al. 2011). In the classroom, it seems many studies have focused on the impact of SNS on learning and teaching. This has led to research suggesting SNS have the potential for improving pedagogy (e.g. Reinhardt and Zander, 2011) and the notion that students could use SNS as much for learning related issues as for their personal use (e.g. Estus, 2010).

In the language classroom, a recent study involving Greek university students found over two thirds of the 48 students regarded the inclusion of a social networking site (Facebook) as an additional learning platform as positive for both developing a sense of community and enhancing the learning process (Dogoriti, et al. 2014). In a similarly focused study, Liu, et al. (2014) targeted student perceptions of using SNS in their language course with participants reporting overall “positive experiences interacting with peers” (2014, p.152). Skinner (2009) however, is one of several authors (e.g. Downing, et al. 2007, Coates, 2006), who stresses the importance of learner engagement in online discussions; reminding teachers that unless discussion topics strike a personal chord with students, many may decide not to join in and “potentially...lose opportunities for learning” (2009, p. 89).

In general, it appears that recent research is positive towards SNS and learning. Although some authors point out the lack of evidence-based research for second language learners when using SNS (e.g. Clark and Gruba, 2010, as cited in Liu, et al, 2014), there appears to be a common belief that SNS can play a role within education. This study however, although focused on HE students, aims to use SNS outside of the classroom. Its primary aim is to enhance the international student experience by helping learners integrate into UK life.

Method

The first step, as identified by Liu, et al. (2014), when considering SNS for students is the choice of site to be used. For this study, a range of SNS were reviewed and Edmodo, often dubbed the ‘Facebook for education’, was chosen. Operating with similar features to Facebook, this SNS allows ‘closed groups’ for invited students, has a free App so students can access the site through their mobile devices, and appears to have received positive reviews from other institutions both at secondary and higher education (e.g. Paddick, 2015). To answer the research question, all 52 students within four classes of a 12 week pre-sessional EAP programme were asked to sign up to the site during the first week of their course. This was introduced to the students by conducting a lesson on ‘social networking’ in the first week. During the lesson, students were asked about their social networking habits and whether using a site amongst new classmates in the UK could help them to settle in. At the end of the lesson, the teacher showed them Edmodo on the computers and students signed up.

Once registered, the teacher created a closed group and invited students to join by using the distinctive ‘group code’ allocated by Edmodo. This allowed them to post comments and send replies amongst themselves. Students were advised to use the site to ask non-curricular based questions and to share their experiences of life and study in the UK. It was also pointed out that, as the site was non-curricular, participation was voluntary. At the start of week two, the teacher supported this with some example threads such as “How does everyone travel into Manchester and how much do you pay?” but, after this, the teacher became an inactive participant; ensuring communication was student-led and aligned to the belief that students could “interact to construct knowledge, negotiate meaning, and...create a community” (Skinner, 2009: 89)

To collate findings, participants were interviewed at the end of their pre-session course as part of their penultimate and final tutorials. These were semi-structured and approximately five minutes in length, with questions targeted on frequency of use, level of interest in using the site, benefits and drawbacks of the site, and the potential use of Edmodo during their university studies. In addition to these interviews, textual analysis of the posts was conducted to identify the topics discussed, the frequency of use, and the level of student participation. This analysis, given the relatively short time frame to collate data, adopted a structural-linguistic approach (e.g. Van Dijk, 1972); analysing the grammatical, syntactic, and lexical features of the language. By taking a narrow approach, this study was able to focus on the language produced by the students at ‘surface-level’, i.e. identifying general language features. This allowed findings to be quantified which in turn helped to identify the main topics of discussion on the site. Establishing the identity and date of comments was done by simply checking the users’ names and date/time stamps on each post.

Findings

A total of 446 posts were made by the 52 students during their 12 week pre-session course. This included posting new comments and sending replies to existing ones. The majority of the 52 students were Chinese (28) and Arab (19) with the remaining five learners from Nigeria (2) and Cameroon (3). In relation to frequency of use, Arab learners were the most frequent users with an average of 17 posts per user (a total of 329 posts). The five African students made a total of 52 posts; an average of 10 per student and the Chinese learners were the least active, with only 65 posts; averaging less than one post per student. This aligns with the student interview feedback which identified five of the Chinese students as ‘lurkers’; meaning they visited the site but did not post any comments or replies.

Topics discussed

As can be seen in Table 1 below, of the 446 posts made by the students, four prominent categories of discussion emerged; entertainment & shopping, immigration, accommodation, and transport. In total, these categories accounted for approximately two thirds of all posts on the site.

Table 1: Discussion topics

Topics	Entertainment and Shopping	Immigration	Accommodation	Transport	Total
Number of posts	163	71	44	24	302

The majority (163) related to entertainment and shopping with queries ranging from ‘where is the cheapest supermarket in town?’ to ‘what is everyone doing this weekend?’ Immigration, accounting for 71 posts, included questions such as ‘how do I renew my Tier-4 visa?’ or ‘who knows where to register with the police?’ Accommodation and local transport issues included ‘Does anyone know any Chinese landlord?’ and ‘What is the cheapest bus ticket?’ and made up 68 of the posts.

Common language features

It is widely cited that the use of abbreviations and emoticons are prominent on SNS (e.g. Crystal, 2011) and, from the 446 posts, these students actively used these language features for fun and humour. There were a total of 103 abbreviations used on the site, with LOL and OMG being used 66 and 25 times respectively. There were also frequent examples of ‘intentional’ orthographic mistakes, for instance “alriiiiight” and “heeeeelp!”, suggesting some of the students were familiar with using SNS in English as this playful attention to form is often cited as synonymous with SNS language (e.g. Lam, 2000). In addition, in almost one third of the posts, the writers’ comments were intended to be humorous or light hearted, with posts such as “I love this English weather....NOT” and “I hope the police let me go after register!!!” This level of informality implies students felt the platform was separate to the classroom and provided further opportunities to create self-identity and build a sense of community; aspects of social networking believed by some authors to be key to their success (e.g. Thelwall, 2010).

Student feedback

From the student interviews, when asked whether the site was useful for settling into British life, more than two thirds of the students either agreed or strongly agreed. A commonly cited

benefit of the site was the interaction they could have with fellow international students in the other pre-sessional classes. Ordinarily, as some students pointed out, interaction with learners from the other three groups would only occur during break times or at university-led social events. Another key finding from the interviews highlighted that the majority of participants (63%) stated the ability to use fun and humour as the main reason for enjoying the site. This connects with the earlier finding of informal language on the site and further suggests that students viewed the site as outside of the curriculum. Additionally, the vast majority (92%) commented that they would like to continue using the site after the pre-sessional course had finished. Reasons for this ranged from keeping in touch with classmates to practising English online.

Despite the relatively positive feedback from the interviews, with a total of 446 posts produced by 47 active students over 12 weeks, the average posting was less than one per week. From the interviews, many students cited the intense teaching schedule and orientation into the other university platforms, i.e. the VLE, email, and online library, as reasons for a lack of activity. With regards to the low frequency of use amongst the Chinese learners, one reason appeared to be the reluctance to move away from L1 social media; namely WeChat and QQ. All 28 Chinese students had the WeChat app on their smart phones and all cited using it in L1 on a regular basis. In addition, some of the students mentioned that, through QQ, they had already connected with some of their Chinese classmates before arriving to the UK; helping them to deal with some of the pre-arrival anxieties such as how to find their accommodation and how to travel from the airport.

Implications and suggestions for implementation

Upon reflection of this study, a number of implications and suggestions for using SNS with EAP pre-sessional students can be made. The first is that SNS could play a role in helping these students connect with each other *before* arriving to the UK. Students could be invited to join an Edmodo group as part of their pre-arrival documents whilst still in their home country; allowing them to build relationships, reduce anxieties, and practise their English before their pre-sessional has even begun. Another implication from this study is that, with such a large proportion of students voluntarily contributing to the site, the amount of time the teacher devotes to non-curricular topics in the classroom may be reduced. A word of caution however, the chance of misinformation on the site could be problematic. With students

answering each other's queries on visa and immigration issues, information needs to be accurate. One suggestion to counter this would be to post a bank of FAQs for students to refer to on the site. Alternatively, a student could be given the role of 'site administrator'; tasked with monitoring posts for accuracy. The final suggestion stems from the positive student feedback about the site. Given the limited timeframe of many pre-sessional programmes and the fact that the course and Edmodo are not directly related, students could continue to use the site *after* the pre-sessional. University departments and faculties could then connect these learners to other international and home HE students on their degree programmes.

Social networking and EAP seem an unlikely partnership but this study has shown its potential in helping international students overcome the incredible challenge of living and studying in a new country.

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