



The Impact of the Use of Social Media on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the use of social media in the process of acquisition of the second language (L2) or foreign language learning (FLL), namely, English in university students. Recently, we have seen a dramatic change in favour of distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemics, therefore, it could be useful to analyse the impact of social media in FLL as they have been used much more now. It is a study summarizing the most important findings of the most recent research into the impact of social media on L2 acquisition from the psycholinguistic perspective. The paper analyses data from research papers as they appear in Scopus and Web of Science databases in the past ten years (i.e. 2010-2020). The purpose of the study is to describe the current research findings, to analyse their importance, to compare the most important data, and to look for further development of the psycholinguistics of L2. Its primary intention is to look into the acquisition of L2, particularly English as a second language (ESL) in the younger generation, i.e., Generation Z of current university students. It also attempts to highlight both the advantages and disadvantages of using social media in L2 acquisition and therefore to highlight future strategies regarding FLL in university education. The current research in this area provides us with overtly optimistic results in FLL with the assistance of social media, however, the paper claims that the situation of utilizing social media in FLL needs further investigation and analysis, mainly from the psycholinguistic point of view. The current COVID-19 situation makes us aware that the impact of social media will increase due to social distancing.

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1. Introduction

The most recent situation of the past decade (2010-2020) has brought new and revolutionary approaches to foreign language learning (FLL) or second language (L2) acquisition [1,2]. Social media are ubiquitous and the research into the use of them in FLL has become vast [3-7]. However, the largest part of the research is not experimental, and it is difficult to verify if the theoretical findings of it can be transferable into reality. We still lack systematic and experimental research from the position of cognitive science, cognitive psychology, information science, psycholinguistics, etc. This paper attempts to systemize and summarize the most important achievements in the field of psycholinguistics connected to L2 acquisition in the younger generation of learners, i.e., Generation Z [8,9].

As the main means of communication, language acquisition is one of the most significant research domains of human cognition. The social hurdles of psycholinguistics are undeniable and continuously changing. The current socio-economic situation, multicultural diversity enriched by migratory flows, and the emergency of social media impact the issue of L2 acquisition [10-13]. While the acquisition of the mother tongue (L1) occurs at an early age, the acquisition of L2 is relatively slow and depends on a variety of factors, such as neuronal maturity, the familial context of monolingual or multilingual, and the social context [14-16]. As a significant component of intellectual processing, the explanation whether in L1 or directly in L2 for more advanced learners is largely pictured in dedicated social media accounts. From simple words, word families, terms, and grammatical rules to funny or sarcastic memes, social media provide us with substantial material, indexed by keywords that is easy to access and analyze [17].

Social media have been continuously transforming and updating our everyday life, in terms of information delivery, knowledge exchange, communication, and visual culture [18]. Today, with 2.95 billion social network users worldwide, social media usage is increasingly attractive and accessible, especially among the younger generation. Thanks to social networks, the Internet has become the main means of communicating and a way to maintain a social life [19]. According to Eurostat, in 2018, 69% of people aged 16 to 74 in the EU-28 used a mobile device (mobile phones or smartphones, laptops, and tablets) to connect to the internet, compared to 2013 data that showed only 43% [20]. Social Media refers to websites, blogs, chats, computer programs, i.e., any content-based form of electronic communication that enables users to share information and express ideas. While Language Learning Social Network Sites or SNS for language learning represent the corpus of those social media channels, mainly designed for specific purposes, dedicated to foreign language learning.

2. Materials and methods

The research was conducted on the use of social media in L2 acquisition and focused on the use of social media in L2 acquisition from a psycholinguistic perspective. The standardized PRISMA methodology for systematic reviews and meta-analyses was used to analyse the current state of the research in the area [21].

The primary method used in the article was the review of the literature on the topic of learning foreign languages using social media. The review was conducted with the use of two acknowledged databases: Scopus [22] and Web of Science [23]. The search period was restricted to the last ten years, i.e. 2010-2020. The earlier search would not generate anything significant as social media has been around us for the past ten years and they have been used massively in language education only in the past few years. The collocated keywords used for the search were: *social media AND psycholinguistics OR L2 acquisition OR second language acquisition OR foreign language learning*. The search was conducted using the Boolean quantifiers AND, OR to combine the keywords or to eliminate duplication, respectively. The collocations could appear in the article title, abstract, or keywords.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: Only research papers in English were included in the search, Research papers in journals and conference papers in Scopus and Web of Science databases, Original research papers,

Conference research papers, Randomized control trial papers, Experimental study papers, and The period from 2010 to May 2020. The keywords used for the search were: *social media* AND *psycholinguistics* OR *L2 acquisition* OR *second language acquisition* OR *foreign language learning*. The exclusion criteria were as follows: Descriptive papers were excluded, Review papers were excluded, and Non-research papers were excluded.

The search was conducted in June and July 2020 as in the half of the year it is very probable that all journal papers from the previous year are already indexed in WoS and Scopus. There is no exact date when all papers should be indexed, but based on experience, it takes a few months, therefore the half of the year seems the most optimal period of the year if we want to cover the whole previous year. On the basis of these keywords and collocations, these numbers of papers were yielded: 494 from Scopus and 929 from Web of Science. The duplicates were removed, and the articles remained to be further analyzed. Out of these papers, only original research papers were identified to be bringing new ideas for the researched topic. These studies were carefully analysed and their findings summarized in the Results section.

The research was conducted only in two databases, however, there are other databases and other essential academic sources (such as Ph.D. dissertations) that have not been researched for obvious reasons. It is almost impossible to collect these sources as there is no established worldwide database. The results obtained this way have yielded important findings and they can claim to be sufficient and representative. Further research should be conducted in other databases and in the near future as the topic of social media and their utilization in the FLL has drawn a lot of attention recently and we can expect the trend will be rising.

4. Results

Scopus 494 total document results – 309 articles in the area of Social Sciences (236), Arts and Humanities (151), Computer science (110), psychology (47), engineering (22), Business, management and accounting (11), Neuroscience (8), Biochemistry, genetics and molecular biology (6), health professions (6). The majority of the papers focused on younger adults (i.e. Generation Z) as they can be targeted with social media most easily and they are also the largest group to be systematically educated in foreign languages. The vast majority of the papers focused on the positive outcomes of the use of social media in L2 acquisition. The drawbacks are mentioned only marginally and there is no systematic research into the disadvantages of the use of social media for the human brain.

Table 1. Number of articles in Scopus 2010-2020.

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
0	18	17	10	17	23	28	38	58	67	61

Out of these, there are 78 open access articles and all of them were analysed. These are articles based on their country of author affiliation: USA (16), Malaysia (9), Canada 7, Netherlands 6, Italy5, Belgium 4, France 4, Germany 4, Indonesia 4, United Kingdom 4. The number of citations is not relevant as the most recent documents will not naturally be cited as many times as the older ones. WoS generated with the same collocations of keywords in titles, abstract, author keywords, and keywords plus generated 929 results (open access articles, 2010-2020, excluding conferences).

Table 2. Number of articles in WoS 2010-2020.

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
18	17	17	30	30	115	129	151	172	180	170

The scientific areas mostly represented are Linguistics (374), Education, educational research (352), Language and linguistics (207), Psychology experimental (86), psychology multidisciplinary (60),

neuroscience (47), multidisciplinary sciences (23), social sciences interdisciplinary 22, and others with less than 20 entries.

Table 3. Geographical distribution of the articles.

USA	UK	Spain	Germany	China	Netherlands	Russia	Turkey	Iran	Japan
185	137	107	57	45	43	34	33	30	24

The findings clearly indicate that the research focuses predominantly on the positive aspects of social media in FLL, neglecting the drawbacks that it can bring or generate. Future research should focus on these aspects as well and they should not be neglected. There is a lot of literature on these aspects (mostly books based on personal experience with social media), however, serious academic research and rigorous discourse are still not sufficient. Witnessing that social media along with social networking have grown a part of learners’ and teachers’ daily routines, in terms of communication, language experience, practice and exercise, news feed, and knowledge sharing, educators shall better incorporate those means into their classes rather than trying to extract learners from what has seemingly become their way of life. To effectively do that, comprehensive research is needed in understanding, from a psycholinguistics perspective, the real range of cognitive processing impacting on L2 acquisition through SM means. All undertaken surveys ought to be synthesized in a methodological structure that would reveal the core of the phenomenon that would further lead to improving L2 teaching methods. It is also interesting to see the geographical discrepancy in the number of papers from Asia and the so-called Western world.

Considering how much technology evolved in the past ten years, we can only assume that, as a constraint to online teaching/learning over the current pandemic situation, it will only explode in the number of users. While the fact that technology must be part of the educational process is not questionable anymore, the way it finds its scope within it and how and to which extent should educators use it, should be delivered by a multidisciplinary methodological approach.

4. Discussion

In a comprehensive study, Brick [24] raises three important questions, should SNSs be integrated into the curriculum, do students need guidance in using them, should online practices be adapted for exclusively HE coordinated online e-learning environments or should foreign language learners navigate on their own in this extremely increasing virtual space, without any proper advice from their teachers? As the number of different eLearning platforms and dedicated social media channels grow, those questions still wait for some honest answers.

Conducting the study by employing a group of participants that were allowed to enroll and engage in any language course and completed the survey, the authors concluded that the most appreciated features by users were practicing oral skills with native speakers and receiving immediate feedback, while the learning material and some translation were criticized. Brick highlights the fact that SNSs cannot be ignored by HEI, moreover in the context of decreasing budgets. The same eLearning platform Livemocha was subject to another survey conducted on over four thousand users in 2016 by Lin, Warschauer, and Blake [25] that reached similar conclusions: the platform offers a prolific space for communication with native speakers but fails to contribute proficiency accuracy.

Analyzed papers show a wide geographical variety, proving that the usage of social media is global, the outcomes of using it in a classroom scaling the same range of interest. While Brick’s report was based upon a survey conducted in the UK, Mubarak’s questionnaire [26] was applied in Saudi Arabia for the purposes of examining students’ attitudes and approaches towards using SM in learning English and focusing on tertiary education and empirical investigations. The main questions addressed referred to the benefits of SM usage and the degree of facilitation of foreign language learning by SM, and the findings revealed that students were very positive and felt motivated by SM. Nevertheless, the author suggests that a guided training and preparation of resources ahead may serve better teacher’s purposes.

Klimanova and Dembovskaya [27] address the issue from a less common taught language perspective such as Russian, where the native speakers’ feedback is more difficult to find through the Russian language speaking users SM channel *Vkontakte*, focusing on two theories – the identity construction through interaction [28] and Discourse Analysis Framework [29]. Using Prensky’s concept of “digital wisdom” as the young generation draws it consciously

from digitally accessible information sources to enhance their cognitive power, the authors propose to extend that concept to a social dimension: “A digitally wise L2 learner is one who takes advantage of the social affordances that Internet mediation provides for L2 learning in order to legitimize his or her social power as an L2 speaker beyond the socially limited setting of the L2 classroom” [27]. The study is based on different tasks and examines the students’ interaction regarding identity construction, framed on Gee’s analytical tools of discourse analysis. The results show that the foreign language learners were able to compensate for the lack of proficiency in L2 by social network features and build their L2 identity during an authentic communication, exceeding the time and space limitations due to SN framework.

The real-time cultural and linguistic interchange that SM can provide language learners seems to be the feature outlined by all authors, Slim and Hafedh included [30]. However, online communication of students raises another important issue addressed by the great majority of authors, that of the nonacademic purposes of SM usage of students and its reduction to chatting on nonrelevant to their field of study discussion. Slim and Hafedh [30] focused their research on Facebook SM usage to measure the vocabulary acquisition of the participants on two groups of students, divided by two, one group was taught Business Letters through Facebook, while the second, enjoyed a traditional, classroom approach. The results showed that there was no evident difference between the groups’ learning outcomes, apart from the visual effects’ appreciation of those involved in learning vocabulary through images, an argument which brought the authors to support the negative impact of SM in terms of distraction. Nevertheless, it was noticed that progress was made by some few students that confessed that images and videos helped them memorize faster and better new vocabulary.

The same experiment research, based on two groups of students, one using SM and the other traditional in-class teaching, was conducted in Bangladesh, targeting the Facebook social networking usage in tertiary level language classrooms, based on the assertion that the use of technology facilitates teaching and learning in language classrooms and the premises that it grows students’ motivation and expose them to authentic linguistic use of L2 [31]. The investigation was theoretically supported by the Task-Based Language Teaching and language socialization postulates. The results showed clearly that the group that used Facebook in a controlled content objective-oriented way achieved twice better results than the traditionally in-class instructed group. However, in a closer analysis, the authors underlined that the greatest impact of improving L2 skills was noticed in the less prepared students, both groups having been diagnosed by an initial test for their L2 level. Thus, leading Shams to the conclusion that using SM and introducing it in the curriculum did not enhance the linguistic skills of the students, but it certainly increases their motivation. Yet, the improvement was noticed at the beginners’ level.

This outcome is supported by a similar survey carried out in Turkey [32] on a target group of pre-intermediate English students that outlined that while the students were excited to use Facebook as a complementary source of exercise and a foreign language learning channel, underlining that traditional in-class teaching is the cornerstone of the education process. Chen [33] underlined the same issue based on her experiment, revealing that the attitude towards SM depends on users’ purposes, for the participants in the study aiming at enhancing proficiency in academic English, Facebook was not appealing due to its informal style, while the participants aiming at improving communicating skills found it useful for social and L2 identity construction.

The analysis of the social media impact on foreign language acquisition needs to be extended to teachers’ practices as well as they are the leading conductors of the long journey learning a foreign language may be. Teachers play an important role in building and shaping their students’ learning patterns and behavior attitudes towards various educational sources, being “social agents who affect students’ cognitive and social behaviors” [34]. The way they encourage their students to use technology for learning purposes impacts on the overall and goal-oriented use of alternative learning sources. The above-stated paper’s outcomes are based on a survey of a large number of undergraduates in foreign languages and underlines the massive influence of teachers’ practices while finding differences between cultures regarding the impact of teachers’ warmhearted support. Similarly, Lin, Warschauer and Blake [25] highlighted the importance of interaction with native speakers through social networks in cultural identity construction in second language acquisition and Brick (2011) reported it as the main positive aspect of using SNS, adding to it the real-time feedback. The immediate response and real-time conversation are also achieved through live sessions on Instagram or Facebook dedicated pages for L2 learners, such as the Instagram stories that offer quizzes focusing on idioms, phrasal verbs or other lexical related items or lives were learners are invited to write down words that they would like to learn the pronunciation.

The massive usage of SM creates a platform to address the motivational problem in learning L2. Indeed, as the exchanges can be multiple, synchronous as well as asynchronous, learners are engaged in a dynamic exchange which always enlists their involvement and therefore increases their motivation. The direct exchanges that occur in discussion groups, exercises, chats, videos, and other widgets on linguistic social networks cover various language registers. With the expanding demand of various social media platforms, the growing numbers of users in different parts of the world, it is fair to assume that it impacts SLA, at least by the permanent flow of visuals and text that we access on a daily basis. In the broad context of globalization, all visuals improve not only linguistic skills, but they also build an international culture. As previous studies highlight both the advantages and disadvantages of foreign language learning through social media networks, it is important to explore the impact of social networking usage on both students and educators from a psycholinguistic point of view.

If earlier studies [35] were conducted to measure the use of SM for communication purposes, the analyses directed within the last ten years focused more on how SM and SNSs are incorporated in daily teaching and learning-oriented objectives. To theoretically support their surveys and sample groups’ analyses, the authors resort to a variety of linguistic approaches, among which we can enumerate community of practice theory [36], identity construction through interaction [28], Discourse Analysis [29], Task-Based Language Teaching and language socialization postulates. The wide geographically spread number of surveys show the global interest in the issue and the outcomes reveal that SM has a considerable impact on less common foreign languages, in terms of oral communication and original native speakers’ input [27].

Although educators have been sharing debates and exchanging opinions in reference to the e-learning platforms for more than ten years now, the coronavirus pandemic made them found themselves obliged to embrace, at last, the distant online learning. So, from hypothetical, theoretical, or, in some happy cases, complementary mode of e-learning platform teaching and learning, educators quickly moved to the reality that imposed immediate response, within modern technology tools’ use in order to make possible for students to carry on with their studies. In this context, a large number of papers emerged dealing with different topics, from how different levels of education were impacted by the global pandemic to specific issues regarding teaching methods and creating online content to be used in classes. Some would argue that continuity in offering in learning focus, through task engagement [37], using online tools, may bring comfort, though the main issue raised in different surveys was the accessibility to the internet [38, 39].

5. Conclusions

The paper attempts to summarize the most important ideas connected to L2 acquisition in younger adults while using social media for learning the language. The challenges of the digital world are ubiquitous, and the possibilities have to be considered so that the educators are able to use them for the benefit of the learners. Social media can bring many opportunities in FLL and the digital world we now live in must be reflected appropriately so that the educational professionals do not lack behind the technologically savvy generation of young users. L2 learners experience today, like never before, the autonomy in exploring digital resources and documents that represent a powerful framework for many aspects of SLA, enhancing oral, written, and reading competence. And while they do no longer depend directly on the teacher, the later must reboot the methods.

There are different aspects of the impact on L2 learning, from internal factors such as age, personality, motivation, cognition, digital skills, or family background to external ones, such as the cultural heritage, education process, and socioeconomic setting, in general. Our analysis on the cognitive impact of social media used for learning a foreign language has attempted to outline the current research areas focus, as mirrored in Scopus and Web of Science databases indexed papers dedicated to the aforementioned topics, measuring the interest in the subject and exploiting the methods applied.

A large number of papers are dedicated to surveys and experiments carried out by scholars to reveal the impact of Social Media on L2 acquisition, displaying a broad geographical variety, situating the cognitive process in a social media communication context, and praising the benefits of it. As the use of technology grew deep into our lives, it reshaped our social habits along with the visual and cognitive processes of reading, learning, remembering, or reproducing information. And the current situation presents us, as well, with a more disinhibited learner and a less obedient student that would freely explore the web, following threads and hashtags, to find answers to his or her queries.

However, no systematic research into the disadvantages of the use of social media for the human brain or whether they lead to poor language patterns' construction are thoroughly discussed, thus neither underestimating the long-term impact of SM nor ignoring the short-term effervescence over a brand-new means of communication. Topics like narrowing the gap between the modes and the extent to which technology is used in different social groups as well as in different languages, as the impact of SM varies from common foreign languages to less taught and learnt foreign languages, teaching strategies, values, and vision, and how the teacher uses this technology in teaching. For implementing the positive findings of different surveys and for educational technology to be used effectively, educators must be ready for a paradigm shift: from traditional education to a pedagogy enhanced by the new technology.

Further research is needed into the current reality and prospects of the utilization of digital media in connection with the wellbeing of the users, increased levels of depression, and some other negative psychological aspects of the use of social media. This paper is the starting point and should be an impetus for further research into the topic of utilization of social media in the current world of interconnectedness.

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