ICLALIS 2013

Can't live without my FB, LoL: The influence of social networking sites on the communication skills of TESL students

Shakiratul Hanany Abd Rahman[a]*

[a] Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah Sandakan Campus, Locked Bag No. 3, 90509 Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia

Abstract

It is getting common to see two or more people sitting together at a café but not talking to each other because they are busy with their smart phones, tablets or laptops to browse through social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace - just to name a few. Virtual communication seems to be more favourable to certain people as compared to face-to-face communication. This scenario may affect our communication skills since it is observed that face-to-face communication takes place lesser these days. The objective of this research is to investigate whether the frequency of using SNSs among TESL students and addiction to these sites (if any) influence their communication skills. A questionnaire was used to gather data from ninety three Semester 8 TESL students from the Faculty of Education, UiTM Shah Alam. SPSS version 16.0 was used to analyze and describe the data obtained. The findings show that the SNSs usage is moderately frequent because even though a majority of the students get connected to social networking sites on a daily basis, they only spend around 1-4 hours per session. It was also found that only a minority of the students is highly addicted to social networking sites. Most importantly, the study found a significant relationship between students' frequent usage and their communication skills.

Keywords: Social networking sites (SNSs); language and communication; communication skills.

* Corresponding author: Shakiratul Hanany Abd Rahman Tel.: + 60 89 248 100; fax: + 60 89 220 710.
   E-mail address: hanany@ums.edu.my

1. Introduction

Social networking sites are definitely familiar to the young generation these days because of their popularity, functions and user-friendliness. Despite of the appealing functions that they offer, a lot of issues have emerged and one of the issues is pertaining to communication – something obviously vital since it is through communication we connect with everyone that surrounds us. It is undeniable that social networking sites have become very common and those who do not possess any will tend to be regarded and stigmatized as outdated. However, being overly addicted can lead to a lot of negative consequences which might later destruct those addicts in many ways.

2. Background of the study

Being connected to the Internet has become a must to almost everyone, regardless of who they are - teachers, students, workers, children, and even housewives. The Internet is indeed very resourceful and people can obtain anything they need since it is only one click away as it offers us nearly infinite information. With the existence of the Internet, everything seems to be possible whereby as end users, we can do online shopping, getting to know new people, paying bills online, searching for sources, doing online businesses or even finding lifetime partners. In short, the answers for nearly all our enquiries are there, thus it is undeniably useful for each of us.

In 2010, the number of Internet users has vastly increased from previous years since Lynn (2010) reports that Internet users would surpass two billion in 2010. That has greatly shown how the Internet is becoming more significant in our lives day by day. Without the Internet, some people might just feel depressed, lonely and moody due to the fact that they lose their source of amusement and information which appears to be one of the most basic essentials in our lives these days.

Among all services that the Internet provides, there is one service that has greatly attracted the youngsters, which is social networking sites (SNSs). Social networking sites are sites where people can get to know new people, share their profiles, trace their old friends, share pictures and videos, publish upcoming events of their societies, and countless others. In short, a social networking site is a kind of website that combines many services pertaining to social affairs under one roof, and that is one of the reasons why it becomes very popular among the youngsters who appear to be very keen about getting instant updates on their friends or on anything under the sun.

The emergence of many social networking sites these days has both positive and negative impacts. First, as for the positive side, they have become great tools for us to communicate virtually with anyone regardless of the distance. Moreover, nowadays, there are a lot of notices, announcements and academic-related information made in the social networking sites, especially Facebook. Hence, it becomes easier for both students and lecturers or teachers to reach one another because it is more time-saving as well as cost-saving.

Nevertheless, the emergence of so many social networking sites also has some negative downsides in which one of them is that they can lead students to be obsessed and addictive to the extent that they could negatively affect the students. For instance, students' communication skills might be at stake because of the addiction. This claim could be further supported by several studies that had been conducted previously which shall be discussed in the later part of this paper.

3. Objectives of the research

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the level of students' addiction towards social networking sites and their communication skills. The students were Semester 8 TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in the Faculty of Education. Specifically, the study is conducted to fulfil the following objectives:

(1)   To investigate the frequency of social networking sites usage among TESL students.
(2)   To investigate the level of social networking sites addiction among TESL students.

(3)   To investigate the influence of social networking sites addiction on TESL students' communication skills.

4. Significance of the study

In our country, the phenomenon of social networking sites is no longer unfamiliar, and in fact social networking sites have become one of the most efficient tools in channeling every latest updates from many institutions, or even individuals. The emergence has definitely attracted the young generation. It is important to note that today's youths play a very significant role in determining the future of our nation. In particular, today's workplaces and employers view communication as one of the main skills a graduate must have. We have heard of graduates who could not speak at interview sessions or, worse still, graduates who completely look foolish during their presentations when they could not deliver a successful presentation. Hence, we want our graduates to be capable communicators, presenters, and skilled negotiators. This is the reason why this particular study is significant because it is vital for us to really determine whether or not these social networking sites have any influences on the students' communication skills. That is due to the fact that communication skills can really determine a person's capability in leading, persuading, conveying accurate information, getting the facts right and the list goes on. As we know, even though some people might be excellent in academic, but if their communication skills are poor, it will be less likely for them to excel in anything that requires excellent communication skills especially when they embark on the working lives. Hence, the study hopes to provide some information which could be useful if the social networking sites are proven to have negative influences on students' communication skills.

5. Influence of social networking sites on students' communication skill

Before going more in depth about what and how social networking sites impact students' communication skills, we have to know more about communication skills. Can they be learned effectively from a textbook, or does one need to listen to others' way of communication in order to be a communicatively skilled person? More importantly, how does a communicatively skilled person actually communicate with others?

Clark (1995) in her book entitled *Interpersonal Skills for Hospitality Management* equalizes being 'communicatively skilled' with 'socially skilled' in which she believes that in order to become a socially skilled person, one needs to learn how to effectively interact with other people in a range of social situations. Clark (1995) also implies that good communication and interpersonal skills are being sensitive to the attitudes and beliefs, rules and norms of social interaction with others including during situations that we are unfamiliar with, or even in situations that change unexpectedly during a particular interaction. The author also emphasizes that social skills are acquired, thus it has to be learned and is definitely not simply instinctive.

In a study entitled *Old Communication, New Literacies: Social Network Sites as Social Learning Resources* by Greenhow and Robelia (2009), one of the findings shows that within students' social networking sites space, they are engaged in a complex range of communicative and creative events that exhibit attention, tone, style, subject matter and writing process to the audience. This ought to be considered as something positive since those aspects are all crucial in order to improve one's communication skills, but the question is, does it help students to actually communicate in a real world, face-to-face with peers and people that surround them; or is it just helpful in a virtual manner whereby no actual communication actually takes place?

Henderson (2010) stresses that face-to-face, or person-to-person communications do involve choice of words, vocal variety, body language, movements and positioning, facial expressions, listening skills and many more, which together make up multiple components of messaging that are effective. Nonetheless, in virtual communications as in communicating through social networking sites, a lot of these aspects are missing because they are substituted with elements like emoticons (e.g., ☺), webcam for visual cues, microphone for audio cues and so on and so forth. Henderson (2010) mentions that in virtual communication, the crucial components of effective communication that

are missing include immediate feedback and response which can generally be obtained and achieved solely via face-to-face communication.

In a recent research conducted by Moeller (2010) a journalism professor at University of Maryland, she has found out that the rapidly growing new forms of communications, which are of course social networking sites, have resulted in the dying of interpersonal, or communication skills. She added that social networking sites do allow a person to communicate quickly and effectively, however it definitely takes a person away from reality by immersing one in the virtual world of communicating. This finding is somehow alarming because it seems like the emergence of social networking sites is threatening the conventional style of communication which is indeed essential in order for each of us to connect to one another in the real world, not just in the virtual world.

Furthermore, the use of social networking sites also alters people's conventional manner of interaction due to the lack of face-to-face communication which has led to the missing of communication skills such as reading body language and other indirect communication facilities (Thompson, 2009). It is also believed that communication through mass electronic, like social networking sites may result in a lower quality of social interaction that normally takes place in the actual world.

In a different research entitled *The Effects of Social Networking Site Use on the Adjustment of International High-school Exchange Students* by Hesse (2007), a total contradictory finding is presented in which the researcher has equalized the use of social networking sites as a form of 'augmented reality'. It is found out that social networking sites do not impede interpersonal communication from taking place, and in fact they do support the formation of real-life relationships.

In an action research conducted by Izar, Alfonso, Ygot, Galvez, Crescini, Lagoras, and Ji (2009) from University of the East -Manila, entitled, *The Effects of Social Networking in the Attitudes Towards Self-Esteem of the UE-CAS*, another finding that somehow supports the above research finding has been raised. Izar, et al. (2009) have found that by being involved in social networking sites, students' interpersonal communication skills can be enhanced through frequent communication and expression. That is due to their tendency to interact with different people in a virtual manner and as a result, it does boost up their communication skills.

Based on the literature review above, it is apparent that previous researches do have different findings when it comes to the influences that the social networking sites have on people's communication skills whereby both positive and negative influences are found. However, up to date, there has not been a study conducted in the Malaysian context pertaining to this subject matter yet and this study intends to fill in the gap and to determine the answer within the context of our TESL students.

6. Sample

A group of 93 Semester 8 TESL students from the Faculty of Education was selected. Basically, TESL students were selected due to their criteria of being the students in an urban university who are expected to be computer literate enough and possibly have at least one social networking site account. Moreover, the researcher has also decided to select TESL students because this study intends to investigate the effects that social networking sites addiction might have on students' communication skills and since they have already studied a course on communication, it has made them the most suitable sample for this particular study.

7. Instruments

The quantitative data in this research were gathered using a set of questionnaire in order to obtain information regarding the samples' demographic data, their level of addiction towards social networking sites as well as their level of communication skills. As for Section A, it consists of four questions and those questions intend to elicit information regarding the respondents' frequency of social networking sites usage. All the four questions required

them to tick appropriate boxes provided. Next, another section which is Section B consists of 20 questions and they intend to elicit the students' information regarding their level of addiction towards social networking sites. The 20 questions were adapted from the original *Internet Addiction Test* (IAT) created by Young (n.d.). The test was originally conducted to determine the level of addiction towards the Internet. Nonetheless, the researcher had modified and adapted the questions so that they could be appropriately used in determining the level of addiction towards social networking sites. As for the last part, which is Section C, it consists of 10 questions and these questions intend to elicit the students' level of communication skills.

8. Method of data analysis

After the questionnaire administration process had ended, the researcher analyzed the data obtained using Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0. All the data obtained were keyed-in and then analyzed.

As for the demographic details and frequency of the students' usage of social networking sites, they were analyzed using Descriptive Statistics in order to obtain the frequency and percentage for the data. Through the frequency and percentage, the data from the questions were tabulated and a clear picture of the distribution became apparent.

9. Findings

It is important to note that every respondent in this particular study does possess at least one social networking site account, and the site of choice is of course, as predicted – Facebook, and this can be proven when all respondents have a Facebook account. This study also managed to unveil the frequency of social networking sites usage among Semester 8 TESL students and overall, it is found that the students' usage is moderately frequent because even though a majority of them log in to their accounts every day, but they only log in for a moderate duration per session. On the other hand, a very small number of students log in to their accounts only once a week. However, in terms of the usage per session, a majority of students get connected between 1-4 hours per session, while a minority of students gets connected between 17-20 hours per session.

There were twenty items used in the questionnaire in order to determine the respondents' level of addiction towards social networking sites. There were three scales for the twenty items in which the first scale was labeled 'Rarely/ Does not apply', the second scale was labeled 'Frequently' and the third scale was labeled 'Always'. The maximum score a respondent could get was 60, while the minimum score was 20. Thus, in order to determine the level of addiction, the difference between the maximum and minimum score was calculated, which was 40, and it was further divided into 3 categories representing 3 different levels of addiction. As for those who obtained scores between 20 and 33, they fell under 'Low addiction' group. Meanwhile, as for those who obtained scores between 34 and 46, they fell under 'Average addiction' group, and those who obtained scores between 47 and 60 fell under 'High addiction' group.

In the study, it was clear that a majority number of Semester 8 TESL students were not severely addicted to social networking sites because more than half, which were 51 out of 93 students possessed low addiction level towards social networking sites. Meanwhile, 37 students possessed average level of addiction. Remarkably, the number of students who possessed high addiction level towards social networking sites was not high, with only 5 students (5.4%) altogether, making it the least number of all. Thus, it can be concluded that most Semester 8 TESL students are not addicted to social networking sites and this has been proven by the findings gathered in this study in which only a minority of the students is severely addicted.

As for communication skills, there were ten items used in the questionnaire in order to determine their competency. There were three scales for the ten items in which the first scale was labeled 'Completely true', the second scale was labeled 'Somewhat true/false' and the third scale was labeled 'Completely false'. The maximum score a respondent could get was 60, while the minimum score was 20. As for those who obtained scores between

20 and 33, they fell under the 'Excellent communication skills' group. Meanwhile, as for those with scores between 34 and 46, they fell under the 'Average communication skills' group, and for those who scored between 47 and 60, they fell under the 'Poor communication skills' group.

Communication in this case is treated as ratio variable using students' total mean score summed from the ten items in the questionnaire. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is .208, indicating that there is a positive relationship (although weak) between social networking sites addiction and students' communication skills. Nevertheless, an interesting finding can be seen where the score of .045 for the relationship strength signifies that a significant positive relationship exists between the two variables. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between social networking sites addiction and the students' communication skills.

The researcher's initial prediction regarding the interrelatedness between the students' addiction and their communication skills is supported through this particular finding. It was found that there is a significantly weak positive relationship between students' addiction and their communication skills. It means that, as the students' addiction level rises, the communication skills become poorer. It was also found that social networking sites addiction does have influence on TESL students' communication skills in a way that the addiction weakens one's communication skills in the reality. This finding is further supported by a research done by Moeller (2010) in which she has found that the emergence of social networking sites has resulted in the dying of communication skills. On the other hand, Izar, et al. (2009) from the University of the East–Manila have come out with a total contradictory finding in their research in which they discovered that by being involved in social networking sites, students' interpersonal communication skills can be enhanced through frequent communication and expression. Another research that supports this claim is the one conducted by Hesse (2007), in which it is found that social networking sites do not hinder interpersonal communication from taking place.

Since this study has unveiled the significant relationship between the addiction and TESL students' communication skills, the students really have to determine the effort that they could initiate due to this alarming finding because we are all aware that TESL students will later become English teachers, and teachers definitely do play a strong part in inculcating the love for learning the subject in pupils or students who may already be quite far, psychologically speaking, from acquiring English. The skilled communicator in the English language teacher may have the possibility to draw silent students and make them enjoy the language classroom and all that English could offer. If the teachers themselves are not communicatively skilled, how do we then expect the output, which in this case is their students, to be excellent at communication?

It is true that becoming an English teacher is not a must for TESL students because their job scope is very wide, but bear in mind that communication is essential in our lives and regardless of which company they will work for later on, they will still need good communication skills. It is also important to note that communication is not only about talking per se. Communication skills are a workplace bonus for an employee: communication solves problems, avoids problems from escalating, provides people with opportunities for dialogues and not toxic emotions at the workplace, encourages one to reach out to people who will normally not budge an inch from their opinions, and the list goes on. Thus, good communication skills have to be embedded in the students in order for them to either become effective English teachers or employees at any companies.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown evidence that TESL students' communication skills could be affected by their addiction towards social networking sites. By being highly addicted, they will tend to disengage from the reality which is definitely not a good thing since it can cause the students to possess poor communication skills. This will definitely trouble them especially when it comes to the daily face-to-face conversation that takes place in the real world. Moreover, our daily transaction, like purchasing goods, dealing at the banks and many others, also require us to converse using good communication skills so that the process can go smoothly. Apart from that, as discussed above, these students will embark on their working lives after graduating, thus it is important for them to

have good communication skills so that they could not just market themselves well, but they could also become effective English teachers and team players at the workplace. Students should also limit their time spent on the social networking sites so that they will not become too addicted. They also need to ensure that their communication skills be regularly polished even if they choose to get connected to the social networking sites on a regular basis. They can do so by spending more time to communicate with real people in the real world, face-to-face, not just via virtual occurrences.

References

Clark, M. (1995). *Interpersonal skills for hospitality management.* United Kingdom: Chapman & Hall.

Greenhow, C., & Robelia, B. (2009). Old communication, new literacies: Social network sites as social learning resources. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*, 1130–1161. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01484.x.

Henderson, S. (2010). *Social networks enhance interpersonal communications.* Retrieved December 11, 2010, from http://ezinearticles.com/?Social-Networks-Rahance-Interpersonal- Communications&id=3850974

Hesse, H. (2007). *The effects of social networking site use on the adjustment of international high-school exchange students.* Retrieved December 12, 2010, from http://www.backin.de/sns-student-exchange.html.

Izar, N. N. C., Alfonso, M., Ygot, E., Galvez, C., Crescini, F. D., Lagoras, C., & Ji, H. (2009). *The effects of social networking in the attitudes towards self-esteem of the UE-CAS.* Retrieved December 14, 2010, from http://www.scribd.com/doc/21632513/Action-Research-in-Social-Networking.

Lynn, J. (2010). *Internet users to exceed 2 billion this year.* Retrieved December 10, 2010, from http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE69I24720101019

Moeller, S. (2010). *Studies show social media may be good for networking not personal skills.* Retrieved December 12, 2010, from http://www.thefamuanonline.com/lifestyles/studies-show-social-media-may-be-good-for-networking-not-personal-skills-1.2237897

Thompson, G. L. (2009). *Facebook: Good or bad for communication.* Retrieved December 12, 2010, from http://www.suite101.com/content/facebook-good-or-bad-for-communication-a121387.

Young, K. (n.d.). *Internet addiction test.* Retrieved December 8, 2010, from http://usfweb2.usf.edu/wellness/content/pdf/Internet_Addiction_Test.pdf.