

A Study of SNP as Second EFL Classroom in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract—SNP (Social Networking Platforms) has been researched and employed as an educational tool by experts and teachers in many countries in recent years. This paper explores EFL teaching and learning in Chinese higher educational setting, and presents the factors that hinder the use of these platforms in a formal EFL learning classroom. It then suggests that these platforms can be used as second EFL learning classroom in universities and colleges in China by developing EFL learning website. In this website, it is essential for both teachers and students to find and share the various English learning resources and for teachers to change their conventional classroom roles.

Keywords—SNP; EFL; classroom; website

I. INTRODUCTION

From computer assisted language learning and information and communication technology, teachers and researchers have been long interested in the use of new technologies in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and learning. These technologies are claimed to provide greater freedom and flexibility to learn at learners' own pace and convenience in language learning context (Zhen, Garthwait & Prat 2008). The application of SNP (Social Networking Platforms) is an example of computer assisted language learning, which is playing an increasing role in EFL learning and instruction. The use of SNP for language teaching has its history in the experience of schools and teachers with computer-assisted language learning, whose origin dates back to the beginning of this century when bloc and QQ (a Chinese instant messaging program) emerged as popular SNP. The first materials using SNP for language teaching appeared in the early 2000s. Research shows that the use of the SNP by foreign language teachers has been increasing (Wanmin 2005:90).

It is argued that web-based teaching materials on the Internet serve as a platform to facilitate teaching and learning and provide new approaches for conducting classes and delivering course materials (Ngai, Poon & Chan 2007:261). Moreover, application of web-based activities and integration of technology in language instruction were found to have a positive effect on learners' attitudes and their motivation for learning a foreign language (Chen, 2004). On this ground, this paper makes an effort to investigate the use of SNP in EFL teaching and learning in China and to explore

ways to use it as second EFL learning classroom in Chinese higher education.

II. EFL LEARNING IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION

A. English Learning Context

The use of technology in classroom has been increasingly the object of study in recent years in China. However, despite all the effort made by researchers and teachers, the use of SNP is still in its infancy in Chinese higher education. A variety of factors contributes to the reluctance in the use of SNP in English learning in higher educational institutions in China: computer access, time strains, individual computer skills and hardware issues, learner social-cultural backgrounds, pervious knowledge and learning experiences

English learning in China is accorded with high attention. English courses, especially reading and listening, are compulsory courses for non-English majors. They are required to learn English for the first two years in college and to pass the national English examination called CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET-6 (College English Test Band 6). High proficiency in English and the passing of CET-4 and CET-6 means the access to Bachelor's Degree and more opportunities of landing on a good job. However, English teaching and learning are somewhat restrained in the higher educational context in China. In conventional settings, language classes are "teacher-led, classroom-dependent and textbook-based" (Gu, 2002): Teachers and students share a textbook, teachers explain the language points to students, students take notes in a notebook and try to memorize them; Class hours are limited, on average, about 5-6 periods a week; language classes are quite large, which involve over 50 students. As a result, the long standing transmission mode of teaching oriented towards passing exams rather than developing communicatively competent language learners has produced generations of "deaf-and-dumb" graduates.

In recent years, universities in China are making effort to change the teaching and learning context through the adoption of technologies, mostly multimedia equipment, which has, to a certain degree, vitalized the conventional classroom. Learning technologies are considered as part of a learning context which encourages independence in learning, enhances deep learning approaches and desirable learning outcomes (Jingya 2014:81). However, the use of multimedia

mainly involves Power Point, which, as is proved, has both advantages and disadvantages (Xibin 2014: 65; Jiandong & Chunyu 2016: 49). Students may be attracted by the texts, graphics, sound and video in a short time, but they will soon realize that they are still learning passively as in a conventional classroom and this context brings inconvenience for the interaction between teachers and students. In this regard, teachers as well as students may feel frustrated and retreat to the conventional way of teaching and learning. And this frustration may hinder teachers' further adoption of new technologies.

B. Internet Used by EFL Teachers and Learners

In order to maximize the utilization of the computers and SNP in language teaching and learning, the perceptions and the users towards the technology and its integration into English teaching should be taken into consideration.

1) *Research method:* The research was carried out in the middle-west city in China, Xi'an. Xi'an city is a university intensive city, over ten major national universities locate here, among which five are key universities. In this research, 54 teachers and 350 students were randomly selected from ten universities as research subjects. Among them, 17 teachers and 223 students are male. The instrument of this research involved a rating scale with 12 statements. It consisted of three sections including attitudes towards integration of SNP and English learning and access to computer and SNP, SNP use in language teaching or learning, and knowledge of network technology. The participants were required to select one of the following options: strongly disagree=1, agree=2, neutral=3, agree=4, strongly agree=5. This research was conducted online and 389 effective questionnaire papers were collected.

2) Results

TABLE I. FINDINGS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS SNP USE IN EFL TEACHING /LEARNING AND ACCESS TO SNP

variables	Mean	S.D.
SNP use could help enhance the quality of English teaching /learning.	4.23	0.871
SNP will help students find English resources in the information age.	4.09	0.878
SNP will benefit English reading, writing, listening, speaking and translation.	4.27	0.854
It is easy to have access to computers and SNP in our university.	3.82	0.910

TABLE II. FINDINGS OF SNP USE IN EFL TEACHING/LEARNING.

variables	Mean	S.D.
SNP has already been integrated into English teaching /learning in classroom.	1.9	0.823
SNP has already been integrated into English teaching/learning outside of classroom.	2.2	0.933
I often use SNP as an electronic dictionary.	2.6	1.152
I often use SNP as a source of English materials.	3.26	0.962

TABLE III. FINDINGS OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT NETWORK TECHNOLOGY

variables	Mean	S.D.
I know how to use SNP in my English teaching/learning.	3.21	1.012
I know how to develop website for English teaching/learning.	1.25	0.965
I know about computer software and hardware.	1.91	0.971
I know how to use blogs, email and QQ to exchange information.	4.09	0.874

- The first three statements in "Table I" are about the attitudes of teachers and students towards the use of SNP in language teaching and learning. The data (M > 4) indicate that the participants responded positively about these statements. Statement4 is about the participants' access to computers and SNP in universities. The research result (M=3.82) shows that computers and SNP are available in universities but not highly accessible.
- The four statements in "Table II" concern the use of SNP in English learning in and outside of classroom by both teachers and students. The data show that the actual use of SNP in language learning is not satisfactory. SNP is lest used in language classroom (M=1.9), while its use outside of classroom is below the average (M=2.2). Participants, teachers in particular, may consult the electronic dictionary, but students seldom use it. The use of SNP as a resource

of English materials is relatively more popular among teachers and students (M=3.26).

- The four statements in "Table III" are designed to research participants' knowledge about network technology. The results of statement 2 and statement3 (M=1.25 and M=1.91 respectively) are negative, from which we can see that only a quite small number of participants have computer knowledge. Teachers and students know more about the use of blogs, email and QQ in information exchange (M=4.09), while have less knowledge of the use of SNP in English teaching and learning (M=3.21).

C. Using SNP as Second EFL Learning Classroom

1) Establishing a website for EFL teaching and learning:

In terms of the EFL teaching and learning context in China, the establishment of SNP as a formal educational tool is not easily realized. The convention mode of teaching has been

long established, and it takes both awareness and courage to change it. The inadequate financial support from the government renders it impossible for a university to set up classrooms equipped with advanced technology. Moreover, the knowledge of teachers and students about computer hardware and software and network technology is quite limited. In this case, the use of SNP will be a long process of exploration, from accepting the importance of SNP use in EFL learning to actually using it in the classroom. In the present transitional phase, what can be done is to arouse the interests of teachers and students in integrating EFL teaching and learning with SNP. Due to the conventional learning and teaching experience, teachers might not be more acquainted with computers and SNP than students. Thus, a combined effort has to be made by both teachers and students to establish a virtual EFL classroom, a second EFL learning classroom shared by teachers and students outside of classroom.

A virtual classroom can be a website. Website refers to a collection of related web pages containing images, videos or other digital assets. A website is hosted on at least on web server, accessible via a network such as the Internet or a private local area network through an Internet address known as a Uniform Resource Locator. Since teachers and students have access to SNP outside of classroom, website can be developed for them to share and exchange information about EFL learning. In this way, communication between teachers and students and among students will increase. More English websites will be introduced and more English learning materials will be shared and there will be more chances for students to practice language skills, reading, and writing, listening and speaking, since there is no time limit in this virtual classroom.

2) *Finding resources available on the SNP*: English learning resources are abundant on the SNP. The acquaintance and selection of these resources is essential for both teachers and students. Maguire (2015) outlines the most common uses of the SNP for language teaching by dividing the resources available in the net in two broad categories: teacher-centered resources and student-centered resources. Teacher-centered resources are those that support teachers in planning their classes and in their own development. In this case, the SNP can be seen as a resource bank or as a source of teaching materials. These resources include foreign language magazines and newspapers and reference books, which include dictionaries, grammar books, journals, newsletters, research projects, theses and dissertations, resource books, mailing lists, language oriented chat rooms, culturally relevant videos and graphics, specific sites for professionals with hundreds of links that lead to maps, online literature, and courses.

A great many of student-centered resources can also be found in the SNP (Ames, 2001; Escobar-Rodriguez 2012: 1088; Maguire, 2015). Students can access a variety of websites to research the countries and cultures that speak English, locate authentic texts about the topics discussed in

the language classroom. They can participate in virtual tours of culturally relevant sites; consult on-line dictionaries and other language-oriented reference materials. They can also practice grammar and vocabulary skills with interactive language programs and develop listening and speaking skills by consulting interactive web pages. The amount of input students can find in SNP tends to be unlimited. These resources promote language learning and increase students' cultural comprehension.

3) *Changing the roles of teachers*: In the virtual EFL classrooms, the responsibility of teachers will shift towards learners and this may dramatically change the roles of teachers, although it is teachers who determine the quality of the learning process.

In conventional language teaching methods, teachers teach facts from books. Teachers are seen as the main source of knowledge to students. However, the new teaching methods focus on the teaching of strategies of deciding what information is needed. The teachers' roles are as guides or facilitators to help learners to be skilled in selecting, accessing, evaluating, organizing and storing information. These strategies are important to manage vast amounts of information. Teachers also need to manage the time and courses and to construct knowledge in the virtual learning community. Besides performing this new role, the teacher is also the motivator of the whole learning process, who facilitates intellectual group discussion. The teacher must reflect critically on the context of learning mediated by technology, teaching methods, students, teacher's own computer literacy, and other matters related to digital literature. Teachers have to play their part to facilitate a learning environment that will open learners' minds to new possibilities. As Zepp (2005: 104) points out, teachers should combine the goals of education with effective use of SNP. They need to adjust their teaching process to suit this new environment. Teachers' role in the virtual classroom is that of a facilitator instead of being a purveyor of knowledge. Pramela (2006) emphasizes on the importance of feedback in teaching and learning in the electronic media because helpful feedback given to learners means creating social presence which is crucial in the virtual mode of learning. Teachers must also be prepared to go through a continuous learning process to improve teaching efficiency. This is because technology cannot replace good teaching but it can enhance it.

III. CONCLUSION

With the increasing access to computers and SNP, teachers as well as students will be more acquainted with their integration with language learning in Chinese educational settings. However, the conventional EFL classroom still dominates language learning field, SNP can only act as a supplement to the formal classroom. New generations of students who grow up as a net generation, will facilitate the process of EFL learning on the SNP. Therefore, teachers will have to face up to the challenge of equipping themselves in the new education-with-technology era.

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