

Like, Follow, Share or Tweet? English Instructors' Use of Social Networking Sites for Professional Development

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate the views of English instructors on the use of social media tools and determine which social media tools they use and which ones they use for their professional development (PD). A questionnaire including three sections which aimed to provide personal information about the participants, investigate their aspects of types, frequencies and underlying reasons of using social media tools and examine their perceptions on the use of social media tools for their PD was administered to a group of instructors working at state universities. According to the findings, there are differences in the type, frequency, and reasons underlying the use of social media tools. It was also concluded that teachers describe positive and collaborative professional activity facilitated by social media tools and most of them noted how social media tools help them tackle various forms of classroom related problems.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; professional development; social networking sites; instructors

Introduction

Recently, the expeditious changes in technology and communication bring the innovations in infrastructure and information sharing. The innovations contribute new usages with the access of the internet into every piece of lives and people deal with the new concepts shaped by the time and space (Brown, 2000). Interaction, communication and information sharing among individuals have become easier. Today, Web 2.0 tools are popular ones of the recent innovations as the best sign to indicate how education has been influenced by the use of technology (Conole & Alevizou, 2010). The demand for communication and information among people is growing because of the increasing use of social networking websites. The users of the applications aim to form online areas for social interaction and share.

This interactive communication with the help of the internet is also called social media. With Web 2.0 tools, different applications have been available such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and YouTube. These applications provide a great contribution to people to learn new things. Jones et al. (2010) state that social networking websites used by teachers and students facilitate learning and teaching. These also have effects on the educational system and synchronously on people's professional development.

Literature Review

Professional development

In education, the term of *professional development* is used to refer to a wide variety of training, formal education and advanced professional learning for teachers. Teachers can improve their competence, professional knowledge, and skill effectiveness. TALIS (2009) adopts a broad definition of PD among teachers: "PD is defined as activities that develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher." (p. 49).

The Ministry of National Education (MNE) describes qualification areas of the teachers and PD. According to MNE's description, teachers should

- "be aware of their professional needs,
- use the information and communication technologies to support their professional development,
- follow up the publications about their professional development,
- design and apply case studies to enhance the teaching process,
- cooperate with professional organizations and join the decision-making process,
- and self-regulate their PD and use information and communication technologies to share information (Köşkeroğlu Büyükimdat et al., 2011, p. 121 - 122).

The Institution of Higher Education in Turkey also highlights the use of communication technologies to have knowledge and share information about the teaching profession and be in touch with colleagues to improve their professional abilities. According to the Ministry of National Education (2008 as cited by Köşkeroğlu Büyükimdat et al., 2011), teachers should benefit from the information technologies to improve their PD. They should be able to use information technologies to communicate with their students, colleagues, specialists, and families. They should be also able to use the technology consciously on behalf of society, so they should adjust themselves to the new technologies.

PD helps teachers be up-to-date on new research on how their students learn, using technology tools for the classroom, new curriculum resources and more. The best PD for teachers should be constant, practical, collaborative and derived from working with both their students and colleagues. In this sense, it is obvious that teachers can benefit from information and communication technologies including social networking sites (SNSs) for their PD. Some of them are online and offline social networks, forums and online conferences.

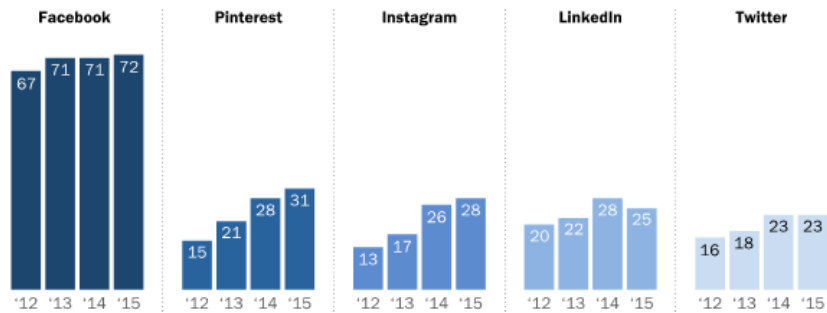
Social networking sites

Knowledge can be shared as independent from time and place with the help of the technology (Korucu & Çakır, 2014), so people can reach information about whatever they search as soon as possible. Web 1.0 technologies enabled the presentation of knowledge, while web 2.0 technologies have included sharing environment such as forums, blog, and wikis (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; O'Reilly, 2009). Today, SNSs have important potential in the education field because it includes interaction and communication tools (Ekici & Kiyıcı, 2012). People of all ages from different environments can communicate with each other by using social networks' virtual settings (Mcloughlin & Lee, 2007). People try to create these virtual settings to raise life satisfaction and social confidence (Valenzuela et al., 2009).

SNSs can present opportunities for people to benefit from each other's experiences (Calvó-Armengol et al., 2009). Kadushin (2012) explains that people can create friendship groups related to their interested areas or can join available groups, so people can transfer their opinions and thoughts on various subjects. Today, Facebook with more than 1.65 billion active users, Twitter over 310 million users, Whatsapp with more than one billion users, Instagram with more than 500 million users and Pinterest with more than 100 million users (www.statista.com, 2016) demonstrate the current situation of the online world.

Pinterest and Instagram Usage Doubles Since 2012, Growth on Other Platforms is Slower

% of online adults who say they use the following social media platform, by year



Pew Research Center Survey, March 17-April 12, 2015.

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Figure 1. Growth on social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2015)

Figure 1 shows that the number of social media users increases day by day. These SNSs have involved in people's lives since 1997 by the first known social networking website, SixDegrees. After that, website users met Myspace and Facebook in 2004. Thanks to the SNSs, it is possible for people to send and share information and even discuss anything rapidly and straightforwardly. Therefore, SNSs are essential for personal development for both learners and teachers. Tufekci (2008) states that students mainly use SNSs to share something, send emails and read blogs.

In addition, social media tools can contribute to teachers' personal and PD simultaneously. Öztürk et al (2016) investigated to see the use of social media for PD purposes by 40 teachers. The results of the study showed that social media tools are effective if they are used for their PD. Teachers believed that social media has an important role in their personal and PD, but they also stated that there might be misuse and dangers of social media.

Kamalodeen and Jameson-Charles (2016) explored to see how 35 secondary school teachers participated in an educational online SNSs. They used a mixed method exploratory design and allowed for the use of online data capture together with interviews and questionnaires. The findings of the research showed that teachers acted the role of the content consumer rather than of content producer.

There have been studies on students' usage of SNSs and its effects on their education (Avcı & Aşkar, 2013; İşman & Albayrak, 2014; Koçer, 2012; Sheldon, 2008), but there is a lack of research on teacher use of social networking sites in Turkey. Sönmez (2013) suggests that teachers use social media tools to communicate with their friends and share information and they also use for the purpose of educational reasons. Nowadays, the use of social media tools needs to be explored for educational purposes, especially in terms of English language instructors. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the views of English instructors on the use of social media tools. This study searches to determine which social media tools they use and which social media tools they use for their professional development.

The concept of becoming a teacher has been changed over the years. However, Giroux (1985) implied the teachers as 'high-level technicians carrying out dictates and objectives decided by "experts" far removed from the everyday realities of classroom life' (p. 376), teachers now improve themselves according to the new reforms and changes in facets of their field. Even if some school managers try to de-skill their teachers, teachers have the opportunity to do something for their

professional development. For example, they make their own decisions in order to provide reports in their classroom circumstances. PD is very essential for the success of these teachers' efforts to improve both their schools (Borko, 2004). The usage of Web 2.0 tools and social media applications has affected the teachers regarding their potential to facilitate their professional development. Therefore, Web 2.0 tools need to be investigated for educational and PD purposes. To this end, the following research questions guided this study.

1. Which social media tools are used mostly among English instructors?
2. Why do they use these social media tools?
3. Does the use of social media tools help English Instructors develop professionally?

Methodology

Participants

Thirty-two instructors working at state universities participated in the study. The participants are 20 male and 12 female teachers. The mean age of the participants was 40.1 in the range of 25 to 50. The mean score of their experiences in years is 13.6. Eighteen of them had a Bachelor Degree, six of them got their M.A degree and two of them graduated from Ph.D. programs. Six of them have been still attending their Ph.D. programs.

Instruments

Participants were given a questionnaire including three sections: a questionnaire interrogating demographic information and a survey with open-ended questions to let the participants reflect on their responses to address research questions.

Procedure

The study utilized qualitative research methods by using a questionnaire adapted by Ozturk et al. (2016). According to Creswell (1994), qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting" (p. 2). Each response was read individually, classified and coded by the researcher. For the purpose of having a better understanding of the influence of social media tools on English instructors not only closed but also open-ended questions were asked to let the participants elaborate and reflect on their answers.

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, data have been analyzed manually and were given in tables to make the result more practical for readers to interpret. The first research question is related to the most used social media tools and why they are used by English instructors. The second research question is related to whether English instructors use social media tools to develop professionally or not.

Results

The results demonstrate that all English instructors use the internet every day. When the data were analyzed for the underlying reasons for using the internet, the results showed differences among the instructors. English instructors ordered the eight items differently and expressed different underlying reasons. In the state universities, most of the instructors stated their purpose of using the internet as

communication in the first order, six of them stated that they used internet for video monitoring in the middle and nine of them stated that they used internet for shopping. Only one participant stated other option in the first order of using the internet for reading for pleasure and news. Similarly, only one person stated other option as the last order of using the internet for news.

Facebook (n=30) is the most used social media tool and this is followed by WhatsApp (n=26), YouTube (n=11) and Google+ (n=8) respectively. When the social media usage of the English instructors from the aspect of being a content provider is considered, content consumer and both provider and consumer, most of them (18) described themselves as a content consumer and 14 of them described them as both content provider and content consumer. In the open-ended questions part of the questionnaire, there were three questions on which the respondents elaborate on their answers related to the use of social media tools for their PD. Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the nine themes for the first open-ended question.

Table 1. English instructors' use of social media tools for the purposes of professional sharing

Themes	English Instructors
Research	14
Entertainment	3
Communication	8
Download and search for methods, techniques, and materials for <i>classroom application</i>	6
Keeping up with new trends and information in English language teaching	25
Content Sharing	11
Obtaining information	16
Memberships	4

As shown in Table 1, the instructors nearly never use social media tools for entertainment. More than half of the instructors use social media tools to keep up with new trends in ELT. It is clear that instructors highly use social networks for the purpose of obtaining information, researching and content sharing. One of the participants emphasized the importance of content sharing by answering the question "Do you use social media tools for the purposes of professional sharing and becoming informed for professional development?" He stated as follows:

I use Facebook for professional development. Some of my Facebook friends are involved in teaching (e.g. as teachers, teacher trainers, Ph.D. student colleagues) and share interesting things on Facebook. I read these contents and sometimes share them on my facebook profile page.

Another participant expressed that it was very helpful to be a member of important issues, so he answered the same question as followed:

An important source for professional development is the IATEFL membership I have gained recently. I think the IATEFL websites are also a kind of social network as good practices are shared there. (Another source for me: "Humanising Language Teaching", a webzine dedicated to language teaching and learning).

As seen in the table below, it is obvious that all of the instructors use social media tools for their PD.

Table 2. Application of social media tools into the classrooms

Themes	English Instructors
Acquire and share for materials	28
Classroom activities and applications	10
Cooperation	9
Making the class enjoyable	5
Keeping up with trends	17
N/A	4

As shown in Table 2, the number of English instructors who acquire and share materials through social media tools is very high. However, one instructor states that she would like to apply the information and materials acquired by social media tools but she is unable to do it because of the limited lesson time.

One of the participants answered the question “Do you apply the experiences, information, and materials you have acquired through social media tools in your teaching process? How?” as follows:

When I read about an interesting activity, it happens that I try it out in my classes. However (and unfortunately) I am not the kind of teacher who uses, for example, YouTube videos in the classroom. I think this is because I am a teacher who avoids exploiting a lot of material in the classroom. I guess I am rather a minimalistic material user. But, I think I should try out using videos in my classes as well to make the lessons more enjoyable.

As stated above, four instructors use social media tools for making their lessons more interesting for their learners. Seventeen instructors use social media tools to keep up with new trends in ELT. However, four instructors say that they do not apply them in their classroom practices. One of the participants who say “no” to this question, explain his answer as followed below:

No, I don't transfer whatever I see on the internet into the classroom. Even though I use social media/Internet etc. to check if a phrase is correct in English or to clarify a grammar point for myself, I hardly ever download worksheet-style activities for my students.

The instructors use social media tools more to share and acquire information, materials, and ideas for their classroom applications to develop themselves in their profession than for making lessons enjoyable.

Table 3. English Instructors' Purposes of Social Media Usage for Their PD

Themes	English Instructors
Keeping up with a new trend(s) and information in ELT	18
Learning about different contexts and different classroom practices	5
Access to information	15
Sharing and Acquiring method, techniques, ideas, and materials	8
Being helpful for students	7
Career in Academia	14
N/A	2

As shown in Table 3, except for two instructors, nearly all instructors believe that social media tools are necessary for their professional development; however, they have different reasons to use it. Most of them use it to keep up with the new trends in their field, to access to information and to improve themselves for their career in Academia.

Here are some excerpts from some of the participants' answers for the last open-ended question "Do you think it is necessary to use social media to help the teachers to develop themselves professionally? Please write your opinion." One of the participants expressed the importance of the ability to use the internet for both instructors and their students:

My answer is a qualified 'yes'. I believe that teachers irrespective of the subject they teach need to be familiar with social networks and the Internet. Of course, a teacher does not need to have a Facebook account, but teachers should actually be aware of these things and they should have developed a kind of digital literacy. It is not only a teacher's job to teach the language but also to prepare the student for using the language in digital contexts – this is inevitable. This is even more important as a remarkable part of the students' lack digital literacy: they don't know how to write an email (how to write the text in the email body, to name the subject, to attach a file or to name a file). I strictly believe teachers must be familiar with these things to teach them in class and to improve themselves, too.

Another participant drew attention to how she used social media tools for her career in the field:

As I am a Ph.D. student, I use the Internet a lot for my research. Indirectly, I believe, this has a positive effect on my teaching.

Similarly, one participant emphasized the usage of social media while doing researches and writing papers for her profession:

I use TESOL academic videos on YouTube to follow and get highlights from leading professors. Also, when I publish a recent paper, I upload it to Academia and Researchgate so that I try to make it more visible. I follow some scholars and keep myself update in terms of new trends and topics in my field.

Only two instructors think that social media may sometimes be a dangerous area and it wastes their time while using it unconsciously for hours. Therefore, they believe that instructors should find other safer ways to develop themselves professionally. Results show that nearly all English instructors believe that social media tools are necessary for their PD with the purposes of changing from keeping up with the new trends in their field to being helpful for students.

Conclusions and Discussion

Several conclusions were reached in the study. First, although there are some differences in their frequency, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Google+ are the most frequently used social media tools for different purposes among the instructors. They mostly use them for communication in the first order and the least for shopping. Second, except for two participants, all participants believe that social media tools help them develop professionally. They provide different explanations and examples to support their ideas in the open-ended questions part such as using social media tools to keep up with the new trends in ELT, access to information and to improve themselves for their career in Academia to be more professional and better in teaching.

Considering the positive attitudes and perceptions of these English instructors should take notice in the field. Except for two instructors of 32 instructors, all the participants in the study use social media tools for their PD. It is also clear that social media tools support PD that helps English instructors develop as autonomous professionals in relation to continuous learning. These results also support the results of Franke et al. (2001) which states that Twitter supports PD of English teachers to develop as autonomous professionals within the framework of lifelong learning and improving.

Most of the participants expressed that social media tools help them interact with colleagues within the country and from different parts of the world. So these results are consistent with the results reached by Labaree (2004) and Dodor et al. (2010) where many of their samples valued opportunities to engage with colleagues, a notion that seems important given to the teaching profession. Last but not least, social media tools are stated by most of the participants in this study to provide them with creative ideas, different applications, and perspectives for their own learning and classroom applications.

The findings have implications for English instructors, administrators, leaders in ELT (or policy-makers) and professional developers. Nearly all of the teachers in the study are active and very motivated to find alternative forms of PD such as forming teacher platforms for sharing their ideas. Administrators may help their instructors follow current issues in their field by providing them opportunities. They may support them and save budget, time and place for their PD. For example, one of the participants suggested that webinars & online conferences related to EFL could be arranged to help teachers in their PD. Social media tools might be accepted as one of the ways of learning persistently changing technology and it might be used in education. Therefore, instructors might learn new things from each other and be more qualified about the use of social media tools to be more effective and motivated.

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