

# Social Media as Technological device in Teaching Reading comprehension: Benefits to Teachers of English

Okueso, Stella Adebimpe<sup>1</sup>, Odeneye, Adesola Rasidat<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Languages, Department of English Language, Tai Solarin College of Education, Omu-Ijebu, Ogun State, Nigeria.

## ABSTRACT

The learning of English language by students has been bedeviled with the adopting of traditional methods of teaching which has been deficient in its ability to meet the learners need in all areas of English contents. The use of Social media is a contemporary method of teaching which is innovative and can be adopted for the learning of reading composition which can lead to the formation of reading group online. The benefits of the use of social media are many such as: independent learning, allowing many participants at a time and effective corrections as at when due among others while there are challenges on the use of the strategy such as loss of privacy and distortion of messages. It is therefore recommended that teachers using social media in teaching must be vast in the knowledge and be able to arrange the teaching contents in the appropriate sequence.

## Keywords

Social Media, Technological device, Reading comprehension, Teachers

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## Introduction

Reading activity is the foundation of learning new knowledge and gaining new skills, and comprehension is the heart of reading (Chen, Teng, Lee and Kinshuk, 2011). Although comprehension is desirable, achieving it proves challenging to English Language teachers. Two problems have been identified. First, research on reading have revealed that successful readers or skilled readers focus on reading as a meaning-getting process, yet there are still readers who focus on reading as a decoding process thus making them unsuccessful or unskilled readers (Baker and Brown, 1984). Meaning making, guided by metacognitive awareness, can lead to better comprehension in reading. Metacognitive awareness is knowledge about ourselves, the tasks we face, and the strategies we employ (Baker and Brown, 1984).

Reading comprehension is the ability to process text, understand its meaning, and to integrate it with what the reader already knows. Fundamental skills required in efficient reading comprehension are knowing meaning of words, ability to understand meaning of a word from discourse context, ability to follow organization of passage and to identify antecedents and references in it, ability to draw inferences from a passage about its contents, ability to identify the main thought of a passage, ability to answer questions answered in a passage, ability to recognize the literary devices or

propositional structures used in a passage and determine its tone, to understand the situational mood (agents, objects, temporal and spatial reference points, casual and intentional inflections, etc.) conveyed for assertions, questioning, commanding, refraining etc. and finally ability to determine writer's purpose, intent and point of view, and draw inferences about the writer (discourse-semantics).

An individual's ability to comprehend text is influenced by their skills and their ability to process information. If word recognition is difficult, students use too much of their processing capacity to read individual words, which interferes with their ability to comprehend what is read. There are a number of reading strategies to improve reading comprehension and inferences, including improving one's vocabulary, critical text analysis (intertextuality, actual events vs. narration of events, etc.) and practicing deep reading.

Social media is a general term, which is used to cover all online platforms and applications not only for personal computers, but also for smart devices such as I pads or Samsung Tablet PCs as well as smart phones. Social media tools are used to communicate, share data, collaborate, and interact for different purposes while you are online. Hence, social media provides a wide range of web instruments, which are easily-accessible, so that individuals are able to talk about, create and share any kind of documents, recommend and

interpret others' sharing and have online reactions to anything that happens all around the world.

Social Media has various definitions evolving in time. According to Buettner (2015), "Social media are computer-mediated tools that allow people to create, share, or exchange information, career interests ideas, and pictures or videos in virtual communities and networks. Another definition for social media was made by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Boyd & Ellison (2008) define social media or social network sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Students are constantly on social media. They don't even pay attention to the classes. They are always chatting, posting pictures, and who knows what else! That network does not let students focus on what really matters!" These expressions show the feelings of many teachers around the world. The use of social media is a general concern among educators. However, no matter what adults think, social media is still a mainstay in the lives of youths. Technology is an essential component of everyday life and "social networking is second nature to our students" (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012). However, is there a way to use social media as educational tool? Can it become an ally rather than an enemy? Teachers have always found ways to reach their students, although the approach may seem scary and unfamiliar. Will teachers succeed this time?

The widespread use of technology in all areas of life has led to its growing presence in educational settings (Grgurovic, 2010). Nowadays, technology is an important resource used in many classrooms with the purpose of enhancing instruction. Actually, according to Picciano (2009), face-to-face and online activities should be integrated in the classroom in a planned and pedagogically valuable manner in order to support the students' academic development. Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin (2010) also pointed out that "computer-mediated communication is one of the oldest yet still most valuable tool of network-based language

teaching, as it puts learners in direct contact with others for authentic communication, and therefore, has positive outcomes for teaching and learning of English". That is why the objective of this study is to analyze the possibility of blending conventional instruction with online instruction via a social media.

Most students in our society spend a great deal of their time outside school hours on social media (Tan, Ng & Saw, 2010). Therefore, using social media to supplement classroom instruction seems to be aligned with the current trend. Additionally, as a result of globalization of digital media, English is now the predominant language of online communication among youngsters although it is not their native language (Crystal 2011; Seedhouse 2004). Thus, it can be beneficial to use social media, to support English language instruction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. Besides, blending conventional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities can contribute to solve teachers' problem of inadequate class time, and can help teachers to make learning reading comprehension more appealing to the students (Manan, Alias & Pandian, 2012).

Evidently, this sociocultural perspective of learning has also several challenges and dangers that need to be considered. For example, some studies have shown that social media has some risks such as: loss of privacy, bullying, harming contacts and more (Livingston & Brake, 2010). Therefore, this paper will analyze all the pedagogical implications of using social media for educational purposes (reading comprehension) in English classrooms. First, it will describe the benefits of this social media. Then, it will examine the limitations and problems of this instructional perspective; and finally, it will discuss practical strategies that teachers can apply in order to overcome these pitfalls and get the most out of social media.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA: AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL**

Social media is a popular communication package that allows users to interact and collaborate within a pre-defined virtual community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It is a social networking site and online communication tool that allows users to construct a public or private profile in order to connect and interact with people who are part of their extended

social network. According to Wise et al. (2011), students spend an average of one hour per day on social media, especially to engage in social interactions. However, social media can have not only social applications but also academic uses.

Janice Petosky, an educator and researcher, said once: "Teachers have to find out where the students are, and work from there. Well, the students are on social media" (2014). This is a reality, and teachers need to take advantage of it. Learning comprehension reading can take place anywhere as long as there are meaningful interactions between learners that lead to construct knowledge. Therefore, if teachers use social media effectively, many of the practices and experiences that occur in this social network can contribute to enhance learning. Actually, this can be considered a form of constructivism because it gives students the opportunity to work collaboratively, learn together and from each other, build learning communities, and construct knowledge through the interaction of members of these communities (Kabilan et al., 2010).

Social media helps teachers to create significant and dynamic educational experiences, especially in language classes, because it allows students to carry out meaningful and authentic interactions with English native speakers (Garrison, & Kanuka, 2004). As a result, learners can improve their language skills, increase their motivation and confidence towards English, and develop cross-cultural understanding (Wenger, 1998). According to Godwin-Jones (2008), "tools and platforms such as Facebook, whatsapp, twitter etc. are useful to improve communication, human interaction, and language learning" (p. 7). Actually, social media can be a practical tool to involve students in reading comprehension, and many other EFL learning activities in a more incidental and informal manner. Research shows that even students prefer to use social media for some instructional activities like sharing multimedia or textual educational resources and interacting with other classmates in discussions and debates (Joinson, 2008; Pennington, 2009). That is why many teachers are using this social network for educational purposes in different classes, including English (reading comprehension).

## **PRACTICAL USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EFL CLASSROOMS**

Although most teachers use social media for trivial activities like sending information to students who were absent or posting class announcements, this social network can be a practical tool for many other educational activities. For example, social media allows EFL teachers to start online discussions, post articles to develop a reading comprehension exercise, start online chats between students and English native speakers, and many other activities (Kabilan et al., 2010). Actually, the TeachThought Corporation published in 2012 an article with one hundred ideas on how to use social media for educational purposes. For instance, it mentioned that social media can be used to attend remote lectures and presentations from all around the world, play educational games like puzzles and crosswords, and participate in challenges posted by educational outlets. Additionally, this platform provides teachers effective tools to manage class projects and assignments (Kharbach, 2014). For example, it can be used to write reviews and reports of books assigned in class, follow journalists on social networks in order to gather past and current news clips relevant to classroom discussions in English, or host a regular English book club with the students.

Evidently, one of the main advantages of social media is that it allows people to share information, knowledge, and resources (Kabilan et al., 2010). In consequence, it can be used to import and share class blogs, post words and definitions for vocabulary review, share resources and materials for class projects, share ideas about class discussions in English, or post students' journals and share them with the class via a classroom page or group (TeachThought, 2012). social media can also be used as a space for collaboration and discussion (Kharbach, 2014). For example, it is possible to involve students in writing workshops with peer review and instructor oversight, encourage students to communicate through a social media discussion wall during class time, connect the classroom with speakers around the world in order to improve their foreign language skills, bring quiet students out of their shell by asking them to participate in social media discussions, create study groups to easily connect with each other within their own social media groups, track down old students or professionals

that could come to the classroom as guest speakers, connect with classes all around the world, and discuss classroom ideas with other teachers on social media. All these ideas can contribute to improve students' English language skills (reading comprehension).

Social media also provides teachers access to valuable educational apps (Kharbach, 2014). For instance, "Booktag" can be used to share books in English and ask students to comment on them; "Knighthood" is a game app on social media that promotes reading skills in English; "Language Exchange" is an app that helps students to get connected with foreign language practice; and finally, "Flashcard" is an application used to create flash cards that students can study on social media to learn vocabulary words in English (TeachThought, 2012). In general, social media has many features that teachers can take advantage of. Actually, there are several studies that explain how teachers all around the world are using this network for educational purposes, especially in English language classrooms. For example, Manan, Alias, and Pandian (2012) mention that they successfully used social media in an ESL (English as a Second Language) environment to post announcements and give students a place to connect with each other and chat in English. They also reported that students were so engaged with this online resource that they continuously posted educational links they wanted to promote (Manan et al., 2012). Actually, social media has many possible uses such as asking and answering questions, posting information, and engaging students in reading and writing activities which are helpful to improve their English skills (Mills, 2009). Evidently, all these results can be transferred to EFL classrooms too. However, these are not the only authors that support the use of social media for EFL teaching. According to Northcote and Kendle (2001), online games on social media can motivate learners to practice English. Tan, Ng, and Saw (2010) also use social media to blend conventional classroom teaching with online instruction with the participation of English native speakers. For instance, they implemented group chats and discussion groups on social media. In consequence, the reason why many educators, especially English instructors, are using social media in their classrooms is because it provides

many benefits not only for students but also for teachers themselves.

## BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EFL CLASSROOMS.

### A. Benefits for EFL Teachers

Teachers can obtain many benefits from using social media. For example, it can help teachers to engage students outside the classroom (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011). Through this tool, instructors can also learn about trends and issues in EFL education as well as to obtain ideas for classroom practice. In fact, although social media is widely known as a digital means of communication, it is also a means for gathering information since it presents powerful professional resources for EFL educators (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010). Nevertheless, these are not the only benefits that social media provides teachers.

Many educational organizations like the International Reading Association (IRA), Reading Rockets (RR), and the National Education Association (NEA) create and publish Pages on social media to promote their organizations and share useful resources for educators (Kabilan et al., 2010). These pages usually include information about current trends and issues in EFL education, classroom resources, opportunities for professional development, and much more. Moreover, they give teachers the opportunity to collaborate with other EFL educators. Following educational organizations through social media is therefore "a way to access valuable information and resources at no expense and through an online medium that is likely being used anyway" (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011).

Teachers who follow EFL educational pages through social media obtain several benefits. For instance, they can get effective classroom resources for free, develop and maintain friendships and collegial or professional relationships for mutual benefit, and receive valuable educational information like notifications of journal publications, tips for teachers, and new books and e-books available for educators (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011). Therefore, social media provides many advantages for teachers all around the world, but they are not the only ones who obtain benefits from this platform.

### B. Benefits for EFL Students

Social media provides many advantages for students. For instance, it promotes human interaction and social interchange between participants (Mills, 2009) which “enhances communication and language learning” (Godwin-Jones, 2008). In that way, social media can promote the development of the communicative competence in English language learners (Blattner and Fiori, 2009). Besides, several studies have demonstrated that using social media in EFL classrooms can help learners to improve their oral production as well as their reading skills (Bosch, 2009; Madge et al., 2009; Naidu, 2005; Ophus & Abbitt, 2009). Therefore, this network has positive effects on students since it makes English language teaching and learning more practical, interactive, and holistic. For example, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) conducted a study with several university students from France and Germany. During the research, they observed that using social media to promote cooperative learning in EFL classrooms increased students’ learning.

Similarly, Blattner and Lomicka (2012) explored 24 American and French university students’ reactions to using social media in a language course (French and English). The overarching goal for the participating students was to learn English and communicate with other learners of English. Therefore, students were required to write postings and respond to others’ postings in English. As a result of this activity, students could improve their communication skills as well as their reading and writing abilities in English (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012). The truth is that online discussion has been found to be less threatening for many students. Stacey and Gerbie (2007) found that struggling learners who were not able to follow the fast-paced class discussion prefer online activities which they perceive are much easier to comprehend. They also found that students were more engaged during online activities as compared to face-to-face class activities, where only the more confident students would participate in the class dialogues (Stacey and Gerbie, 2007). Therefore, using social media can truly enhance students’ communication and interaction in the target language (Mills, 2009).

social media also provides students meaningful learning experiences that give them the opportunity to practice their language skills in a more incidental and informal manner (Grgurovic, 2010). This helps teachers to make connections

between instructional and real-life tasks. In that way, students can use the skills learned in the classroom and apply them to real situations outside of class (Godwin-Jones, 2008). Manan et al. (2012) noticed that using social media to connect the theories and concepts learned in class to real life contexts is a good way to enhance students’ understanding. In their study, conducted with 535 adolescents of different EFL classrooms in Malaysia, they found out that social media was a powerful pedagogical tool that helped students to improve their English language skills. Although this study was conducted in an ESL environment, the results are also practical for EFL classrooms.

Students also have positive views and opinions regarding the use of social media as an educational tool to facilitate reading comprehension. For example, learners consider that social media provides opportunity for authentic interaction and communication that they have not experienced before. They also think that it increases confidence in language acquisition and sense of connectedness among themselves (Wang & Chen, 2007). Kabilan et al. (2010) also mention that students enjoy using social media because it give them the opportunity to practice English with native speakers in a more natural and friendly environment. In fact, O’Hanion (2007) says that, when students have to talk to English native speakers, they feel forced to improve their language skills because they need to communicate with them in English. Therefore, their language abilities increase simply because they write, read, listen, and speak in English more. For example, Kabilan et al. (2010) points out that students can learn new vocabulary words through friends in social media because when their friends post comments using words that they don’t understand, they feel motivated to refer to a dictionary and look up the meaning of those words. Similarly, those students who play games on social media feel forced to improve their English skills because those games require students to understand instructions in English and to interact with fellow gamers in English. All this demonstrates that people learn better in social settings like social media because they expose learners to authentic and relevant social interactions.

However, although social media provides many benefits for students and teachers, it also presents several challenges and dangers for those who do not use it wisely and responsibly. Thus, the next

section will discuss several challenges implied in the use of social media.

### CHALLENGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN CLASS

Simply adopting a technology and not truly understanding its potential will not suffice. If teachers do not try to learn more about the multiple uses of all these online tools like social media, it won't be possible to engage and motivate students because they are ahead of teachers in the use of technology (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012). However, this is not the only challenge that educators face. A second challenge is the distinction between entertainment and truly intellectual engagement. The nature of multimedia can captivate students easily, but this visual engagement does not necessarily represent intellectual engagement. In fact, too much multimedia stimulation can interfere with the deeper cognitive processing that is critical to learning (American Psychological Association, 2009). That is why teachers need to make sure that the activities they plan to develop using social media really help students to learn.

On the other hand, there are also concerns that social media "increases the likelihood of new risks to the self, such as the loss of privacy, bullying, harming contacts and more" (Livingston & Brake, 2010, p. 75). According to Huffman (2013), uninformed students and teachers can put themselves at risk by sharing the most innocent piece of information. Once information is released into cyberspace, it becomes a part of a global network. Persistence and search ability of content, replication and manipulation of content create a framework in which underage children are at risk (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Online bullying has gone global as well. That is why some schools prohibit the use of social media and internet on school. In this case the solution is professional development. Professional development is essential to training classroom teachers and students on both the benefits and risks associated with social networking (Huffman, 2013). Furthermore, collaboration and inclusion of all stakeholders is vital in order to develop appropriate activities and lessons, especially when social media will be used as an educational tool (Picciano, 2011).

Another issue that needs to be considered is the influence of having teachers as "friends" on social media. Although most students want to have their

teachers as their friends on social media, some prefer not to do it because, as Jong et al. (2014) mention, some students have been affected by what they wrote on Facebook after adding their teachers as friends. Another problem is that the self-disclosure of instructors on social media could affect their credibility and the perception that students have of the teacher. That is why many authors suggest educators to create a different social media account just for professional and educational purposes (Huffman, 2013; Jong et al., 2014; Picciano, 2011).

Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) also analyze another challenge of using social media in the classroom. Generally, instructors are interested in the use of technology to augment student learning; however, at times, they have difficulty maintaining students' attention on class activities when social media activities are initiated. Conflicting evidence exists on the impact of social media on dedicated study time since some authors suggest that social media users spend less time studying and achieve lower academic results compared to social media non-users (Leveritt et al., 2012). For example, in a study conducted by Kirschner and Karpinski (2010), it was possible to observe that social media users had lower GPAs and spent fewer hours per week studying than nonusers. According to Fox, Rosen, and Crawford (2008), this usually happens because if a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing homework, he will suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if he just thought about the homework until he was done. Fortunately, this context is a little different in English classrooms because in EFL classrooms, the knowledge is constructed precisely by interaction and communication. Actually, students can practice English as they talk to their friends about topics that are interesting for them. The only thing that teachers need to consider is to give students the opportunity to have access to English native speakers in order to promote productive conversations in English.

Finally, it is also important to consider the learning preferences of students. Those learners who have a more rigid, stronger, traditional view of teaching and learning do not consider that social media can be an effective online environment to learn. For example, according to some students, to grasp and enhance the English language, it is necessary to have a more academic

and formal structure (Manan et al., 2012). That is why teachers need to be balanced and try to adapt the classes to the needs and preferences of all students. They also have to be careful not to overuse social media or consider that this tool will replace face-to-face instruction and practice.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the information presented before, it is possible to conclude that social media can help teachers in the process of teaching reading comprehension to blend online instruction with conventional face-to-face teaching successfully (Grgurovic, 2010). The advancement of the internet has created a borderless world. Thus, teaching and learning are no longer confined to the four walls of a classroom (Picciano, 2009). Therefore, EFL teachers need to be creative and be up-to-date with the current technology in order to keep up with the fast-paced society. Thus, with careful planning, EFL teachers can utilize social media as a powerful instructional tool to engage students in meaningful language-based activities and to enhance the development of the communicative competence in language learners (Mills, 2009). Actually, if planned appropriately, social media can even facilitate the development of an online community of English language learners where students can practice their language skills through videoconferences and chats with English native speakers (Kabilan et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, educators also need to consider the pitfalls and challenges of this tool like the loss of privacy, bullying, harming contacts, and more (Livingston & Brake, 2010). It is not possible to ignore these dangers. That is why teachers need to address these concerns through planning and better organization of contents. When teachers plan appropriately and wisely, they can maximize the benefits and minimize the pitfalls of this tool in order to transform the classroom into a safe, rich, and interactive environment (Huffman, 2013). Additionally, it is necessary to train students on both the benefits and risks associated with social networking in order to successfully incorporate social media into their academic lives because regardless of the pitfalls, social networking is still an essential component in the lives of youths (Picciano, 2011). Therefore, teachers have to make the effort to overcome the challenges and take advantage of the benefits that

this technological tool provides. Nevertheless, it is still unclear if there are other technological tools that provide the same benefits as social media, but with less risk. Continued investigation of online education may provide further insight into these matters.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby presented:

1. The teachers are expected to be familiar with the use of the appropriate technology
2. Learners should be acquainted with the technological know-how of the application to learn English comprehension
3. The teacher must prepare good environment for the learners' understanding
4. In Nigeria, the provision of the appropriate supportive applications should be enhanced such as good network.

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