Learning English With Texting on Social Media: The Case of Taiwanese ESL Students in the U.S

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media has induced substantial growth of various cultural contacts, resulting in a great variation of uses in English. In light of the popularity of new social media, contacts of people from different cultures have been changed from predominant face-to-face encounters to instantaneous communication. This case study examines how Taiwanese students relate their ESL learning experiences to the use of social media and how their uses help transform these ESL students’ gender/ethnic identities during study abroad. Adopting an ethnographic research approach, the results suggest some barriers and challenges those ESL students face during the time abroad, both linguistically but also in terms of intercultural friendship. Pedagogical implications and recommendations are made on how to more effectively using social media in developing linguistic and intercultural competence in the context of study abroad.
INTRODUCTION

The increase in new media and communication has significantly impacted language learning and its pedagogy. Social media has the potential to facilitate the active participation of learners in the creation and delivery of content. It can also provide a powerful connection between a variety of formal and informal learning contexts. Research into the relationship between social media as well as social interaction and linguistic gain during study abroad is still rather limited.

The case study adopts an ethnographic research approach, including participant observation and informal interviews to analyse the use of social media of a group of Taiwanese ESL students of Shih-Hsin University during their study abroad programme in the US. A total of 18 participants with semester-long English learning experiences through study abroad programmes between 2013 and 2015 were recruited. During that period of time, data was collected via observation of various smartphone applications, such as LINE, Skype and/or Facebook. Participant observation of the Taiwanese students’ smartphone interactions with their friends was also conducted whenever possible. The study provides some insights on the overall circumstances of the participants’ intercultural friendships on these social media sites.

In this chapter, the usefulness of texting on social media of a group of Taiwanese ESL students in the USA will be examined. It aims to explore two areas: linguistic gain as well as intercultural identity and communication. It is believed that only by understanding the experience of ESL learners in an intercultural setting, can language teachers develop relevant strategies to support their learners from a particular cultural background. Towards the end of the chapter, some recommendations will be made on how to more effectively use social media to develop linguistic and intercultural competence in the context of study abroad.

SETTING THE STAGE

Texting on Social Media and Digital Literacy

The special nature of text messaging communication has led to a wave of studies internationally. Much research on texting, or short messaging service (SMS), has been primarily devoted to the addictive behaviour among global teenagers and its psychological and cultural implications (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Reid & Reid, 2004). These studies have identified a relationship between increased mistakes in writing assignments and the increased use of text messages amongst students, especially teenagers. One of the explanations is due to the abbreviated SMS language which teenagers prevalently use when texting (Rössler & Höflich,