

**Don't be scared! Utilizing social networking sites within English as a Second  
Language adult learning environments**

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## 1. Chapter Overview

### Overview

All too often, social media platforms are seen as the main culprits of “the dark side” of technology (Fullan, 2013). A shift in attitudes is needed within educational contexts regarding how social media platforms can be utilized to cultivate, rather than detract from learning. Although there are dangers in misusing technology, being aware of risks and knowing how to approach them can provide positive learning opportunities for educators to realize the potential of using digital platforms (Fullan, 2013). Thus, educators must set parameters for the effective and appropriate use of social media tools for students to become responsible digital citizens inside and outside of the classroom. If students are to become successful, participatory citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is crucial that learners have meaningful opportunities to effectively apply their skills within public digital spheres. Using technology should extend beyond the classroom environment in order for students to continue the learning process long after they finish school (Kolb, 2013). Therefore, the versatility of social media platforms can provide stimulating opportunities to transform learner engagement, meaning-making, and the acquisition of skills and content-knowledge.

This chapter focuses on how social networking sites (SNS) can provide communicative and engaging opportunities for language acquisition within higher education and secondary level English as a Second Language (ESL) educational contexts. SNS provide opportunities for ESL young adult and adult learners to express their various personal and cultural identities and interests while using and being exposed to authentic language. Particularly, SNS can provide vast opportunities for multimodal communicative learning in addition to fostering collaboration

and developing written skills. Although this chapter is for ESL educators, the information presented can be adapted regardless of the subject being taught. Educators can use it to meet diverse students' needs, as part of any curriculum, in any context.

### “Social networks” vs. “Social networking”

The term “social networking sites” (SNS) is defined as “social networking technologies that facilitate or enable communication and collaboration between individuals and groups through the use of cloud-based technologies. These technologies include visual media...audio and text sharing applications, wikis, blogs, networking platforms...” (Pardy, Thomson & Patridge, 2014, p. 246). However, boyd and Ellison (2007) differentiate between the meaning of “social networking sites” and “social network sites” by stating that, “networking emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers” (p. 211). As such, boyd and Ellison (2007) believe that networking is not the main purpose for interacting with others on these digital platforms. For this chapter, the term “social networking sites” (SNS) is used because although ESL young adult and adult learners may utilize SNS to interact with classmates or others within their extended social network, they may also network on SNS to build relationships with other global ESL learners or native speakers.

### SNS in current educational contexts

“Social networks are changing the ways we view knowledge and learning and the ways that we manage education” (Dogoriti & Pange, 2014, p. 156). With more people using SNS than ever before, student needs and desire to use SNS have caused educators to rethink and expand the learning process beyond a traditional classroom setting (Saykili & Kumtepe, 2014).

Additionally, Greenhow and Robelia (2009a) argue that educators should realize that SNS and other digital platforms are not merely vehicles to deliver course content. Rather, educators have to determine how to use SNS to engage students in critical reflection and creative interpretation of observations and course content (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a).

Although there is a strong desire to integrate SNS within educational contexts, there has been relatively little research regarding how SNS can be utilized within ESL programs to support language acquisition (Saykili & Kumtepe, 2014). Paul, Baker and Cochran (2012) offer a theory explaining the apparent lack of SNS in education by arguing that the educational value of SNS could be better acknowledged if faculty actually knew how to seamlessly and effectively incorporate SNS into their curricula. It is clear that educators, especially those within ESL environments, need guidance as to how they can incorporate SNS into their courses. This chapter responds to this need by offering research-based recommendations for effective integration of SNS in ESL curricula.

## **2. Theoretical Frameworks**

### Changing the conversation about technology

Integrating technology within education, which includes SNS, provides rich opportunities to create a more engaging learning environment in which students collaborate to make meaning and transform lesson content while personalizing learning (Fullan, 2013). Educators must consider current research about how students use technology inside and outside of educational contexts, but not make assumptions about students' technological abilities and why they use technology. In the "Young Canadians in a Wired World - Phase III: Teachers' Perspectives" report, Steeves

notes “in spite of the fact that young people demonstrate a facility with online tools, many students lack the skills they need to use those tools effectively for learning” (2012, p. 3).

Therefore, educators must consider that although students enjoy using SNS, they may not know how to use SNS within educational contexts. Additionally, educators must reflect on how to integrate technology, pedagogy and content knowledge within curricula.

### Understanding technological pedagogy - The TPACK Model

Educators who are concerned about their lack of familiarity with technology are missing the point of using technology in education. As illustrated by Mishra and Koehler (2006), the problem is that “there has been a tendency to only look at the technology and not how it is used” (p. 1018). Thus, educators should not be so concerned about knowing how a technological device or digital platform functions. Rather, they should critically reflect on how technology, pedagogy and content knowledge (TPACK) intersect when planning to use technology in curricula (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Before educators and curricula developers integrate SNS into educational contexts, they must first question what they hope to achieve in doing so. As there are many types of SNS, instructors can adapt these platforms as they see fit to help students effectively engage with course content.

### Engaging and interacting with SNS – Kolb’s “Triple E Framework”

Educators may not be confident in using SNS platforms to foster learning and skill acquisition. The “Triple E Framework” offers a more hands on approach of how instructors can *engage*, *enhance* and *extend* learning with technology while meeting specific learning outcomes, inside and outside of the classroom environment (2013). SNS can be utilized as an educational

technology platform by “allowing students to: learn outside of the typical school day, bridge their school learning with everyday life experiences and grow as lifelong learners...” (Kolb, 2013). However, technology needs to effectively permit students to make meaning with course content in a way not possible through means of using traditional tools (2013). In using SNS, instructors can *enhance* learning through peer-to-peer collaboration and feedback by using interactive SNS features like comment boxes or polls (Kolb, 2013). Utilizing SNS can *extend* student learning and growth of self-sufficiency beyond the classroom environment (Kolb, 2013). For example, in updating a Weebly.com blog, students can use mobile devices to document evidence (pictures, videos, voice recordings) outside of the classroom environment and reflect upon lived experiences to make meaningful connections with course content (Kolb, 2013). However, although SNS have great learning potential, there are risks when interacting with others in these spaces. Being aware of risks and how to approach them can provide a positive learning opportunity for educators and students.

### **3. Preparation for incorporating SNS within educational contexts**

#### **Becoming aware: Current risks of using SNS**

According to Auld and Henderson (2014), educators have expressed that they do not have sufficient time to investigate how their students use SNS and what issues they face within these environments. However, educators need to be aware that their students could experience issues pertaining to cyberbullying, unwanted contact, privacy invasion, unintentional/unwanted disclosure and distraction when utilizing SNS. It is important for educators and students to be aware of these issues in order to recognize them and know how to deal with such problems when they occur. In Figure 1 below, some of these risks of using SNS are outlined. The infographic is

compiled from Christofides, Muise and Desmarais' study, which surveyed 256 adolescent users of Facebook between the ages of 12-18 to determine if they had had a negative online experience when using Facebook (2012). Although this study is regarding adolescents under the age of 18, the implications are applicable to all users of SNS as anyone can experience such problems within these shared digital spaces.

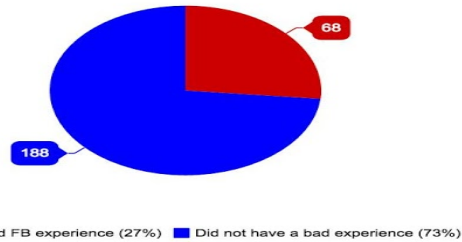
# Negative Facebook Experiences



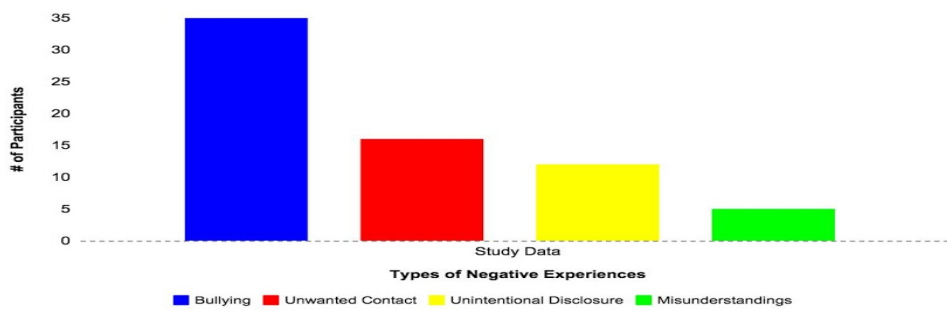
In a study of 256 students aged 12-18 years old, 68 participants stated that they had a bad experience on Facebook.


Bad experiences categorized as bullying, unwanted contact, exposure/unintentional disclosure and misunderstandings.

Facebook experiences of participants aged 12-18




Breakdown of Participants' Negative Facebook Experiences







35 participants were bullied on Facebook. One stated, "Sometimes things on the internet can hurt people more than in real life."



16 participants experienced unwanted contact on Facebook. Unwanted contact included friend requests or inappropriate messages.



12 participants said people posted information about them without their permission. Others felt regret after sharing info about themselves on FB.



5 participants had their posts taken out of context, which caused misunderstanding. One stated "I saw pictures and jumped to conclusions."

## Reference

Christofides, E., Muise, A., & Desmarais, S. (2012). Risky disclosures on "Facebook": The effect of having a bad experience on online behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 27*(6), 714–731. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411432635>



### Figure 1

After examining the risks of utilizing SNS, one may question whether incorporating SNS into curricula is too challenging. However, for effective integration of SNS within a course, students must learn how to protect and conduct themselves accordingly on SNS. Christofides et al. state that if adolescents and young adults are more aware of SNS consequences or if they have had a negative experience on SNS, they are more likely to protect themselves within these spaces (2012). However, research also suggests that being aware of the negative consequences is not enough to change students' online behaviour (Christofides, et al., 2012). Educators have to do more than make students aware of potential hazards of using SNS; they must cultivate a culture of responsible digital citizenship. Greenhow and Robelia (2009b) define digital citizenship as “the ability to practice and advocate online behavior that demonstrates legal, ethical, safe, and responsible uses of information and communication technologies” (p. 125). Through becoming responsible digital citizens, students can build transferable digital skills that will be applicable throughout their educational and professional careers.

### Creating responsible digital citizens: Acknowledging differences and setting expectations for using SNS

Before educators implement SNS in their classrooms, they must first acknowledge the potential for “digital inequality” (Hargittai, 2003) in students' social networking abilities and access to SNS outside of the classroom. Hargittai (2003) defines digital inequality as “a refined understanding of the digital divide that emphasizes a spectrum of inequality across segments of the population depending on differences along several dimensions of technology access and use” (p. 822). Specifically, educators should be aware of whether students have access to quality equipment, autonomous use of digital platforms, social support networks and the skills needed to

effectively use online digital platforms (Hargittai, 2003). All students do not share the same knowledge and expertise in using SNS (Pardy et al., 2014). This may be especially true for ESL learners who may have used different SNS compared to SNS that have become popularized in Western countries. As such, educators should conduct a thorough needs assessment to determine students' current abilities in utilizing SNS. Educators should note that although students may use SNS outside of educational contexts, this does not mean that they know how to effectively and appropriately use these platforms within educational contexts. Therefore, when demonstrating how to use SNS, students who are more experienced social networking users can be paired up with a less experienced student to help navigate SNS and multimodal tools. At the start of a session, a collaborative and multimodal activity could involve students making a "how to" video or blog about using SNS features.

Above all, educators should make students feel comfortable when using SNS and adequately address any anxiety that students may have in using SNS. As suggested by Pardy et al., the classroom should be a safe environment in which students feel free to explore new ways of thinking (2014). When first using SNS, instructors may want to use invitation only or closed SNS only viewable by those within the group (Pardy, et al., 2014). For example, if an educator is wary about immediately using Facebook, they may opt to use Edmodo, which is similar to Facebook, but on a closed and invite only educational social networking platform. Students will likely feel more comfortable using a more controlled SNS environment when starting to understand privacy settings and learning how to conduct themselves accordingly within these spaces. Furthermore, if students do not wish to use an existing social media account, they can create a different user account. Ultimately, educators will have to gauge how their students feel about utilizing SNS before integrating it into curricula.

Setting expectations will be extremely important if educators and students are to reach an understanding regarding how to effectively and appropriately use SNS. Although young adults and adult learners are of consenting age to accept the terms and conditions of SNS, educators should ensure they have student consent before moving forward with using SNS in the classroom (Auld & Henderson, 2014). In addition, Auld and Henderson suggest these terms and conditions of using SNS should be re-evaluated and re-negotiated as potential issues arise (2014). A co-creation of a classroom SNS contract between the teacher and students would allow students to determine how SNS will be used and how to address problems when they occur. In my own ESL classrooms, I enact this type of activity at the start of a session. I get students to collaborate with each other to write our classroom “rules” as students are more likely to buy into and adhere to classroom expectations when these are co-created. Auld and Henderson recommend that for students to fully understand the importance of respectful and appropriate interactions on SNS, they should consider how “to see the world from the ‘face of the other’ so that we [they] have a much better idea of how to enact respectful ethical practices across a variety of social contexts” (2014, p. 201). Emphasizing the need to respect others by understanding how one’s actions could be perceived is especially important when other SNS users are unknown (Auld and Henderson, 2014). In turn, students can learn and practice enacting strategies to help combat issues such as cyberbullying and privacy invasion. Teachers can model appropriate behaviour on SNS and help students identify areas for potential miscommunication on SNS (Auld & Henderson, 2014). Presenting authentic, problem-based situations allow students to make meaning and collaborate to determine effective strategies in maintaining healthy relationships and professionalism when using SNS. Learning how to appropriately conduct oneself within various digital platforms will help develop responsible citizenship skills that go beyond the confines of the classroom.

One excellent resource that educators and students can consult to educate themselves is the “Digital Tattoo Project” from the University of British Columbia (see Figure 2 below). This website aims to “raise questions, provide examples and links to resources to encourage you to think about your presence online, navigate the issues involved in forming and reforming your digital identity and learn about your rights and responsibilities as a digital citizen” (Digital Tattoo, n.d). In one section titled “Connect Feature: Social Media”, website visitors can complete activities to learn, think and explore various issues regarding online digital platforms (Digital Tattoo, n.d). This website is a comprehensive resource to help SNS users become more aware of their digital presence online, identify potential risks of various digital platforms and in turn, become responsible digital citizens.

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Digital Tattoo


Home Protect Connect Learn Work Publish Blog Badges About

» Home » Connect

## Connect

What do you know about connecting online? What do you need to learn?


- Learn about your responsibilities as a digital citizen and a social media personality.
- Consider how to manage your location based apps to get the privacy you want.
- Explore current topics related to surveillance and what it may mean to you as a student and as a citizen.



**Connect Feature: Social Media**

[Learn More!](#)


Image Credit: Social Media by the Digital Tattoo Project



**Community Discussion Boards**

[Learn More!](#)

Image Credit: Discussion Boards by the Digital Tattoo Project



**Geotagging**

[Learn More!](#)

Image Credit: Geotagging by the Digital Tattoo Project

**Figure 2:** [Untitled Digital Tattoo Project screenshot]. Retrieved March 31, 2016 from <http://digitaltattoo.ubc.ca/connect/>

## Setting parameters for SNS use outside and within educational contexts

Educators will have to set parameters as to how and when SNS will be used outside and within the classroom. How often will students use SNS inside and outside of classroom hours? To what extent will students be expected to participate in activities on SNS? Educators will have to clearly outline how learning objectives will be achieved when utilizing SNS. In addition, they should outline SNS learning goals each time SNS are used. For example, in a study done by Hunter and Caraway (2014), which showed how Twitter was used in two English Language Arts (ELA) classes, the instructor identified daily Twitter goals at the start of the class. Setting social

media goals for each class session is an excellent way to keep students on track and helps students to see how they will meet course objectives. Furthermore, reviewing what was accomplished at the end of class and creating next steps for using SNS will help students reflect upon what has been learned and give guidance as to what they are expected to do next.

Next, an educator will have to consider class management and how SNS will fit into classroom activities. An excellent example as to how this can be done is illustrated in Hunter and Caraway's study. At the start of each class, the instructor highlighted "Tweets of the Day" to introduce discussion and review tweets students previously posted (Hunter & Caraway, 2014). After this, a short content lecture was given, which often addressed student tweets, questions or comments (Hunter & Caraway, 2014). Hunter and Caraway note that "Doing this provided students with the opportunity to view their contribution to a lived curriculum" (2014, p. 78). In the remaining class time, students completed reading activities, used Twitter to tweet about assigned readings and worked on assignments (Hunter & Caraway, 2014). Hunter and Caraway observed that through integrating Twitter into these ELA classes, students became more engaged in activities inside and outside of classroom hours because they felt their opinions were valued by the instructor and fellow classmates (2014). In fact, students started to arrive earlier to class to review others' tweets and continue tweeting in hopes that their ideas would be highlighted during the lesson (Hunter & Caraway, 2014). In this study, Twitter provided opportunities for meaningful learning, engagement and critical reflection. Using Twitter outside of the classroom gave students opportunities to *extend* their learning experience.

It may take time and trial and error to finalize how SNS can be utilized in a classroom setting. However, careful consideration of using SNS can produce rich opportunities for authentic interactions that extend beyond educational spheres. In the next section, SNS will be examined in

ESL young adult or adult learning environments as a means to provide opportunities to build community, increase multimodal literacies and enhance written skills.

#### **4. Utilizing SNS within ESL educational contexts**

##### **Building a sense of community**

In using SNS, users are able to instantaneously connect with people who may be halfway around the world or sitting next to them in a classroom. SNS users can foster a sense of community, build relationships and create new ways of understanding each other that was not previously possible (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). Greenhow and Robelia's study examined how adolescent students used MySpace outside of educational contexts (2009a). Participants reported that over an extended period of time, relationships with other MySpace users (which included fellow classmates), were strengthened (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). This was due to MySpace "creating a space where they could learn more about the internal lives of close and extended contexts" (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a, p. 1142). Within ESL contexts, utilizing SNS can provide equal opportunities for all students to participate during SNS activities, especially those who dislike face-to-face classroom interactions. SNS can be a platform where ESL students can have their voices heard and support others. For example, in Greenhow and Robelia's study, they noticed many instances in which classmates on MySpace offered support to peers who expressed emotional distress (2009a). For international ESL students who experience feelings of homesickness, stress or trouble adjusting to a new environment, SNS could provide a new space to express feelings and offer support outside of the classroom.

Using SNS within ESL educational contexts can encourage students to interact with each other outside of classroom hours and thus, have more opportunities to better understand their

fellow classmates. Maloney (2007) argues that the conversational, collaborative and communal qualities of SNS reflect good models of learning because such sites encourage student participation and interactive engagement. For example, in a study that gauged ESL learners' experiences of using Facebook in an ESL classroom, students reported that Facebook fostered a stronger sense of community within the classroom, in addition to increasing levels of communicative competence due to positive and authentic interactions each other (Dogoriti & Pange, 2014). Although it is not specifically explained how Facebook was utilized in this class, I experienced how Facebook helps to foster a sense of community within an ESL educational context. A group of my ESL students developed a class Facebook page separate from course requirements. Students regularly shared pictures, organized cultural outings, posted recipes, and shared humorous memes about learning. Using Facebook provided students with an opportunity to express themselves and interact with each other outside of the classroom. These students built stronger relationships with each other by increasing their awareness of others through the expression of their identities on Facebook. If ESL educators are not sure how to use Facebook for evaluated activities, they could start by creating a class Facebook page for social interactions.

Twitter is another SNS that has been examined within academia as a medium to cultivate a sense of community both outside and within educational contexts. Gleason notes in his study titled "New Literacy Practices of Teenage Twitter Users" that the act of re-tweeting, liking and mentioning others' tweets provides excellent opportunities to promote discussion and show support for fellow Twitter users (2016). In addition, Gleason argues that Twitter users must actively listen to each other to effectively participate within this platform (2016). For ESL learners, Twitter could provide a unique opportunity to hone a new kind of listening skill by



becoming better attuned to the feelings of others. Educators engaged in social networking conversations by “listening” to their students can create lessons that reflect student interests.

It is evident that utilizing SNS can definitely foster a sense of community within ESL educational contexts. Educators must encourage their students to build positive relationships with each other while using SNS. In the next section, it will be shown how SNS provide many opportunities to develop multimodal literacies.

### Developing multimodal literacies

More emphasis should be placed on non-academic communicative skills that students are developing outside of schooling contexts (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). In addition to comprehending print-based media, students must also develop *21<sup>st</sup> century skills* which encompass “digital literacies of online reading, writing and communication” (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a, p. 1131). Such *21<sup>st</sup> century skills* can be cultivated by integrating Web 2.0 tools into curricula for students to present and create multimodal compositions, which in turn, increases their level of digital literacies. Web 2.0 tools are “certain applications of the Internet and World Wide Web, including blogs, wikis, video sharing services, and social media websites such as Facebook and MySpace, which focus on interactive sharing and participatory collaboration rather than simple content delivery” (Businessdictionary.com, 2016). Web 2.0 tools provide opportunities for collaboration, engagement and discussion of others’ multimodal creations (Dogoriti & Pange, 2014). Students create multimodal texts using a combination of pictures, video, and audio creating new digital forms. Because of this, definitions of literacy are changing with the increasing use of multimodal tools within SNS and other digital platforms

(Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). Moreover, multimodal tools are changing how people comprehend ideas and respond to others (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a).

### Expressing ideas through creation of multimodal texts

Twitter is an example of a SNS that easily allows users to express themselves through a variety of multimodal tools. Twitter users post content in a tweet that is 140 characters or less and can add pictures, gifs (animated pictures), videos, links to web-content, or polls. Twitter users can create a profile picture, profile description and background image, which would give ESL students an opportunity to personalize their Twitter page to reflect their identities and interests. In Gleason's (2016) study of adolescent Twitter users, participants often expressed their ideas by creating "multimodal compositions, typically images with text overlaid"(p. 47). This is called a meme. The difference between a meme and a gif is that a meme is usually a static picture, while a gif is a moving picture. An example of a meme can be seen below in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** [Untitled ESL teacher meme]. Retrieved March 31, 2016 from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/96123773267197312/>

Incorporating memes into tweets provides an extra representation of what the user wishes to convey. Twitter provides an excellent opportunity for an added element of a visual representation when reading or composing tweets, which would certainly help ESL students to gain a better understanding of what is being expressed. However, as memes and gifs sometimes relate to popular culture or English jokes and idioms, ESL students may have difficulty comprehending why a meme or gif is humorous. As a solution, educators could slowly introduce simpler memes that do not represent difficult idioms or pop culture references. For example, students could choose a gif or meme that represents an emotion to add to their tweet.

Twitter users have many opportunities to use traditional forms of literacy (by composing the text of their tweet) in addition to developing new literacies, by creating multimodal texts (Gleason, 2016). Both literacy forms are developed in the following weekly activity for

intermediate-advanced ESL students. Students find an inspirational quote or create their own quote that represents who they are or how they are feeling. Then, students tweet their quotes in addition to adding a meme, gif, or image related to the tweet. Students then participate in a Twitter conversation by re-tweeting or replying to another user's quote. This commentary continues for a week. On the last day of class in the week, students conduct a Twitter debrief to discuss their own tweet and how others responded. In a final culminating Twitter activity for the term, students examine all of their quotes and give a small presentation about their findings. Twitter can also be used during warm up activities to activate prior knowledge of a lesson topic by searching for related news articles or pictures and then tweet the results. Hence, Twitter uses various multimodal tools to express ideas and develops various literacies.

SNS can also be seen as an extension of one's identity through the representation of multimodal texts and the use of multimodal tools. In Greenhow and Robelia's MySpace study, participants stated that their MySpace website served various functions: "as a virtual phone, a photo album, an MP3 player, a diary, a notebook, a storage place...sometimes a therapist even" (2009a, p. 1141). Thus, these users saw MySpace as an extension of their lives represented in these multimodal tools. One participant stated that MySpace and its various multimodal tools allow users who have difficulty expressing themselves in face-to-face interactions the opportunity to present a personalized image of who they would like to be (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a).

MySpace gave these study participants feedback opportunities through the use of comment boxes to engage in multimodal conversations (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). "Multimodal texts can be interactive as users can "write back" further blurring the lines between authorship, readership, production and consumption..." (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a, p. 1137). Thus, SNS

like MySpace allow students to view and comment on others' work. As such, users are exposed to multiple, instantaneous interpretations of a topic in ways that were not previously possible within face-to-face interactions. An ESL educator could use MySpace or another kind of SNS blogging space for students to create longer multimodal texts. In viewing others' work on SNS, ESL students enact critical thinking skills to reflect on others' interpretation of course content, which enhances their own understanding. Educators could assign pairs or small groups during social networking activities to review others' work and conduct a round table discussion after an assignment has been completed. I have done this in an advanced ESL course. This provided students with more opportunities for deeper reflection of what others posted. As a result, students developed multimodal literacies through interaction and creation. Although MySpace is no longer as widely used as it was during the time of Greenhow and Robelia's study, the findings and implications of this study gives educators insight as to how other SNS and Web 2.0 multimodal tools provide excellent opportunities to share and create multimodal compositions.

It is clear that SNS provide multiple ways to represent ideas, interests and identities through multimodal creations and develop *21<sup>st</sup> century skills* students take with them beyond their educational careers. However, ESL educators may be concerned how students can improve written skills when completing activities on SNS. As will be explored, SNS can allow students to practice and improve their written skills.

## Enhancing writing skills

### Addressing skepticism – “OMG!” text-speak

Educators are concerned that using SNS will cultivate poor language skills such as text-speak (Gleason, 2016). Text-speak uses non-traditional written structures such as abbreviations (LOL,

OMG), short forms and capitalization for emphasis (Gleason, 2016). One participant in Gleason's (2016) Twitter study tweeted "So many cute girls omg crying" (p. 14). In examining this tweet, although it utilizes text-speak, the idea is still clear. I think educators have to confront the reality of writing on SNS. Additionally, educators must reflect upon learning goals when using SNS during writing activities. Is it to ensure that students use the correct form of a certain verb tense? Is it to formally evaluate a piece of writing? Is the goal to promote written fluency?

Regarding text-speak, Rebecca Wheeler and Rachael Swords argue "a student's primary discourse might be different from academic language; however, this does not make the student's language deficient...teaching students to navigate between home and school discourses...privileges both languages" (Turner, 2009, p. 61). Instead of pushing text-speak aside in educational contexts, educators should acknowledge and embrace it because this can provide an excellent opportunity for students to examine and negotiate meaning of authentic language use within various contexts (Turner, 2009). By examining both text-speak and Standard English uses, students are able to identify how language changes depending on the context, which "will help them to see what is appropriate in one setting may not be appropriate in another" (Turner, 2009, p. 62). Therefore, depending on the purpose of the activity, ESL students can use unconventional writing practices to emphasize points, shorten ideas or express emotion. As long as the meaning is clear and within activity confines, using text-speak could be an excellent opportunity for ESL students to use authentic native English language usage. Educators who may be wary about text-speak could as Turner (2009) suggests, allow students to use text-speak during journaling, brainstorming, or for preliminary drafting. In allowing students these opportunities to use text-speak, this enhances the initial writing process during which students transmit their thoughts into writing (Turner, 2009). As ESL students often struggle to come up

with enough ideas to express their thoughts in English, opportunities to utilize text-speak during writing activities can promote written fluency. As a result, ESL students can communicate their ideas more freely, regardless of whether this is during SNS activities or other classroom exercises.

### Audience and grammar

What skeptical ESL educators may be happy to hear is that based on several studies (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a; Gleason, 2016; Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010) study participants actually gave great care to ensure that they used proper grammatical structures and considered their audience when constructing posts on SNS. Greenhow and Robelia noticed that in construction of multimodal texts on MySpace, participants' writing generally reflected academic literacy practices such as using appropriate tone and style for their audience in addition to using suitable word choices (2009a). One participant stated that when writing on SNS, they are actually more aware of how word choice and tone will be interpreted by others (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a). "Like I can say something jokingly and when it's typed out and there's not syntax to it and you don't know how a person is saying it or the way a person looks while saying it, it can come off like a completely different way than you intended it to mean" (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a, p. 1151). ESL students can practice utilizing appropriate tone and word choice when creating their posts, which can raise awareness of these elements of writing during other activities. In addition, instructors can ease students' fears of making mistakes on SNS by assuring students that these can be used as teachable moments to increase pragmatic awareness of how their message is perceived versus what was actually intended. Additionally, Twitter users in Gleason's study remained aware of correct grammatical structures, spelling, punctuation, capitalization and conjunctions when composing their tweets (2016). Two participants stated that

because they were concerned about demonstrating “perfect” grammar and writing mechanics, they deleted tweets that contained errors (Gleason, 2016). Therefore, even on SNS like Twitter where users are restricted to 140 characters, users still place importance on using proper forms of English grammar structures. In Kabilan et al.’s study, ESL learners acknowledged that although they were not likely using correct grammatical structures, they still took great care in constructing what they wanted to post on Facebook because their fellow peers would be reading and responding to their posts (2010).

In analyzing the participants’ responses and uses of written structures within the studies mentioned above, an interesting trend emerges. It is evident that SNS users consciously strove to use proper grammatical structures and chose appropriate audience tone because they knew other users and peers would see their posts. As Kitsis (2008) notes about social networking users “an audience of their peers is the most meaningful forum out there” (p. 31). Perhaps students who use SNS work harder to showcase their creativity and knowledge through their SNS posts because they know that their peers, instructors and other SNS users will read and respond to their posts. With this realization, educators could use SNS as a way to encourage and motivate students to do their best work because their fellow peers will see it. Personally, I have seen quite a difference in the motivation of ESL students when they know they will share their written work with their peers; they work harder to achieve the task at hand because they want to show others what they can do.

## **5. Conclusion**

To conclude, I personally believe that all educators, regardless of the context they teach in, should begin to embrace the use of SNS and other digital platforms within education. These digital spaces harbour enormous potential to help students become more engaged with course



content in addition to helping cultivate skills that will transfer beyond educational spheres.

Although it may take some time to determine how to effectively integrate SNS into curricula, I believe the time has come for the negativity and ill will towards such platforms to be left behind.

Learning about potential risks of utilizing SNS can provide an excellent opportunity for educators and students to foster a culture of responsible digital citizenship. If done correctly and addressed now within education, maybe such risks of using SNS will lessen or disappear in the future.

ESL educators can use SNS to help cultivate a sense of community within their courses, which is of utmost importance if students are to become more comfortable and familiar with their fellow classmates. Additionally, utilizing SNS provide multiple opportunities for ESL students to enhance the learning process by understanding and producing various multimodal texts that are created through the use of Web 2.0 tools. In creating these multimodal texts, although ESL educators may fear that students will use poor writing habits, it has been shown that social networking users actually take great care to carefully construct and create content that contains appropriate audience and grammatical structures. Furthermore, using SNS can give ESL students an opportunity to increase their written fluency and use of authentic English language structures that are commonly found (and used) by native speakers, which without a doubt includes their own teacher. It is clear that more research is needed to specifically identify how the use of SNS affects language acquisition within ESL educational contexts. My hope is that this is done sooner, rather than later. It would be such a shame to disregard such a rich and intriguing opportunity to enhance the learning process because educators are fearful.

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