

# Cultural perspectives on utilizing social media to improve foreign language learning and teaching: A literature review

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**Abstract:** Positive attitudes towards social media in foreign language learning are found in literature but few studies have addressed the cultural perspectives on the roles of social media in foreign language learning. This article aims to explore how cultural perspectives on the roles of social media in foreign language learning have been addressed in literature by reviewing the theories and frameworks of integrating social media into foreign language learning and exploring the empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of social media on foreign language learning. Results revealed that theoretical development of integrating social media into foreign language learning was quite slow and there was no solid evidence that social media was effective on foreign language learning, especially on academic performance. This article concludes with recommendations for future research and potential opportunities for international collaboration.

**Keywords:** cultural perspective, foreign language learning, literature review, social media

## Introduction

With the development of technology, more and more language educators have considered using technology, especially social media, to assist with language instruction (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016; Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson & Freynik, 2014; Yang, Crook & O'Malley, 2014). Social media are the internet-based services that allow individuals to create a public profile, share connections, and track individual updates (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). There are six types of social media platforms used for educational purposes, including functions for social networking (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), bookmarking sites (e.g., Delicious), social news (e.g., Reddit), media sharing (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, Flickr), microblogging (e.g., Twitter), and blogging (e.g., blog website). The ubiquity of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) in educational settings prompts foreign language educators to utilize social media to mediate and enhance foreign language instruction (Hattem & Lomicka, 2016). For example, mobile devices and social networking sites (SNS) were examined in Aladjem and Jou's (2016) study. Facebook was investigated in Aydin's (2014) study to learn learners' interactions with the teachers. Wang and Kim (2016) also studied Facebook to examine the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Instant messenger was used in Baek, Yoo, Lee, Jung and Back's (2017) study to create a peer-tutoring environment that improved students' performance. Twitter posts were investigated in Harmandaoglu's (2012), Lim and Fussell (2017), Liu, Evans, Horwitz, Lee, McCrory, Park and Parrish (2013), and Solmaz (2017) studies.

The relationship between culture and foreign language learning has been widely recognized. The cultural aspects of countries where a foreign language is common in surroundings, plays an essential role in that foreign language's acquisition (Ambrossi, 2015). With the surrounding of the foreign language learners have some immersion to learn how to use

words, rules, and knowledge to see, understand, and communicate through multicultural and cross-cultural activities (Heidari, Ketabi & Zonoobi, 2014; Keesing, 1974). Brown (1994) described that “language is a part of culture and culture is a part of language (p. 165)”. Language is one of the visible parts of culture and it is shaped and influenced by the culture (Jiang, 1994; Zhong & Xu, 2019). Language serves as the media to make people understand the beauty of diverse culture. In other words, culture and language cannot be independent of each other. Although there is no clear definition of culture, in foreign language learning, culture was interpreted as the deposit of knowledge, beliefs, and artifacts (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 2000), the ability to communicate with people in other cultures (Lusig & Koester, 1996; Tananuraksakul, 2015; Zhong, 2016), four senses (Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990), and four perspectives (Robinson, 1985).

However, when social media was utilized to design foreign language learning environments, culture as an essential role in learning a foreign language learning has been rarely discussed. Research regarding social media mainly focuses on the effectiveness on academic performance (Barrot, 2016; Jones, 2014; Kamnoetsin, 2014; Mompean & Fouz-Gonzalez, 2016; Wang, 2017; Zhong & Hartsell, 2015), attitudes towards using social media in foreign language learning (Akbari, Eghtesad, & Simons, 2012; Bařöz, 2016; Gamble & Wilkins, 2014; Lin, Warschauer, & Blake, 2016; Momcilovic & Petrovic, 2016; Rahimi, Azhan, Normeza & Baharudin, 2015; Sorensen, 2013), motivation and anxiety (Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016; Hsiao & Broeder, 2014; Gabarre, Gabarre, Din, Shah & Karim, 2016; McCarty, 2011), engagement and interaction (Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016; Boonkit, 2011; Fewell, 2014; Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014), and online identity (Dressler & Dressler, 2016). Studies regarding the roles of culture in social media environments as well as whether the integration of social media in foreign language learning has improved the language learners’ cultural understandings of that new language are scarce. It is still unknown that how instructional designers and language educators should address culture in social media learning environments.

In order to gain a full picture of the effectiveness of foreign language learning in social media environments and to understand the cultural perspectives on the role of social media in foreign language learning, this study (1) reviewed the theories and frameworks of integrating social media into foreign language instruction, (2) examined the empirical evidence of the effectiveness of social media in foreign language learning, and (3) investigated culture’s roles in social media environments in foreign language learning. In this study, investigation of foreign language learning focused on four aspects: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Culture in this study was interpreted by using Robinson’s (1985) conceptualization, which includes behaviorist, functionalist, cognitive and symbolic. Robinson’s (1985) definition is adopted in this study because this framework considers culture not only as a process of understanding and interpreting a phenomenon but also a cultural product that can be passed from generation to generation. Robinson (1985) noted that the development of cultural versatility is important to help learners meet the demands of an increasingly multicultural world. According to Robinson (1985), behaviorists consider culture as a set of patterned behaviors. Functionalists believe culture is to make sense of the behaviors. Foreign language learning is to understand and make sense of the patterned behaviors through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Cognitivists view culture as a process of interpretation and symbolists define culture as the product of interpretation. For cognitivists, foreign language learning is to interpret the incoming data from the culture through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For symbolists, foreign language learning requires the understanding and interpreting of cultural products, such as literacy

achievement, artistic achievement, and historical development, through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Thus, the following questions are explored in this study:

1. How are theory and framework used to integrate social media into foreign language learning and how have these been developed?
2. What empirical evidence of the effectiveness of social media in foreign language learning is found in research?
3. How have the cultural aspects of countries that use the language been addressed in literature?

## **Method**

This study systematically searched the following specialized database: EBSCOhost, ERIC, and Education Abstract. Additional Google Scholar searches were performed. Search keywords included Facebook, Twitter, Google plus, foreign language learning, language and cultural learning, social media, social media in language learning, social networking, and blogs. Social media (i.e., ResearchGate) was also used to outsource to other researchers inviting their collective input. Content analysis was performed to identify all the literature published in refereed journals from 2009 to 2018. Content analysis was chosen as the data collection method because this method helps researchers combine the articles that are similar to each other in the light of the themes and helps to convert the themes into readable forms for readers (Bauer, 2000). The article selection criteria are:

- (a) Academic publications, including academic journals, conference proceedings, and workshop proceedings;
- (b) Articles that focuses on foreign language learning, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking;
- (c) Articles that have integrated social media into the foreign language instruction.

There were 221 articles that met the inclusion criteria after duplicated articles were excluded. The quality of the article was assessed with the following rubrics:

- (a) Sampling method is representative of the population;
- (b) Findings are clearly presented.

After the selection and assessment of the articles, 64 articles were identified for this study. Among the 64 articles, only six articles were identified as empirical studies, most of which were quantitative studies. Most qualitative studies did not meet the requirement of triangulation, which is a common effort to ensure validity and reliability of research. The identified 64 studies were examined based on the research questions. Also, theoretical frameworks, context in which the study was conducted, names of social media, purposes of using social media in foreign language learning, frameworks or theories used in the study, research methods, and the effectiveness of the utilizing social media tools were analyzed in detail to generate possible themes. Next, researchers conducted another round of analysis to check the classification accuracy of the articles. Descriptive analysis was utilized to synthesize all the articles and interpret the emerging themes.

## **Results**

The review of the selected articles identified 22 different theories and frameworks. Among the 22 theories and frameworks, social constructivist theory is the mostly used theory,

following by technology acceptance model (TAM), sociocultural theory, and social presence & learning community. Other theories, such as self-determination theory, computer-assisted language learning, and social cognitive theory, are also used to study foreign language learning in social media supported learning environment. It is also noticed that most theories and frameworks (69%) were utilized to investigate online interaction, online collaboration, emotional satisfaction such as motivation and confidence, and attitudes towards the ease and usefulness of social media in foreign language learning. Only nine theories or frameworks (31%) were used to examine student's learning performance (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Theories and frameworks used to integrate social media in foreign language learning*

Theory/Framework	Social Media	Country/Context	Purposes	Literature Sources
Asynchronous learning	Twitter	Saudi EFL learners	EFL writing	Ahmed, 2015
(a) the Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model (Block, 2003); (b) the sociocultural/activity theory (Lantolf, 2000); (c) current L2 grammar learning theory (Ellis, 2006); and (d) computer-assisted language learning (CALL) theory (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). E-portfolio theory	Wiki site	Taiwan undergraduate EFL students	Undergraduate EFL grammar achievement	Singman, 2012
Task-based language teaching	Facebook based e-portfolio	Philippine	ESL writing	Barrot, 2016
Socio-cognitive learning	Facebook	Thai undergraduate students	EFL undergraduate students reading	Boonkit, 2011
Mobile learning	Facebook	Thai students	Writing behavior	Kamnoetsin, 2014
Long's (1996) social interaction hypothesis	WeChat	Chinese EFL students	Utilization evaluation in English pronunciation	Wang, 2017
	Facebook group	Iranian EFL learners	TOEFL score	Khoshnoud & Karbalaeei, 2014

Self-Determination Theory	Facebook	Iranian PhD students	TOEFL score	Akbari, Pilot, & Simons, 2015
Astin's theory of student engagement	Facebook	Iranian PhD students	TOEFL score	Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016

From Table 1, Facebook was the most widely used tool which accounted for 73% of the entire social media tools. The study subjects were mainly Saudi EFL students, Iranian EFL students, and Thailand EFL students. However, social media tools used to examine foreign language learning performance as shown in Table 1, Facebook only counts for 50%. Other tools such as Wiki site, WeChat, and Twitter were also used to improve foreign language learning performance. The contexts of using social media tools in foreign language learning were different. Twitter was used in Saudi EFL to improve students' writing while WeChat was utilized to help Chinese EFL students with English pronunciation.

Researchers then examined the six empirical studies that contained social media usage in foreign language learning. The six empirical studies are organized in Table 2 according to different countries, research method, and the effectiveness on foreign language learning performance.

Table 2

*Empirical evidence of the effectiveness of social media in foreign language learning*

Theory/Framework	Social Media	Country/Context	Research Method	Effectiveness	Literature Source
Asynchronous learning	Twitter	Saudi EFL learners	Quantitative	Writing	Ahmed, 2015
Long's (1996) social interaction hypothesis	Facebook group	Iranian EFL learners	Quantitative	TOEFL score	Khoshnoud & Karbalaie, 2014
Self-Determination Theory	Facebook	Iranian PhD students	Quantitative	TOEFL score	Akbari, Pilot, & Simons, 2015
Astin's theory of student engagement	Facebook	Iranian PhD students	Quantitative	TOEFL score	Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016
Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)	Facebook	Thailand undergraduate students	Quantitative	Writing	Kitchakarn, 2016
(a) the Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model (Block, 2003); (b) the	Wiki site	Taiwan undergraduate EFL students	Quantitative	Writing	Singman, 2012 (dissertation)

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sociocultural/activity theory (Lantolf, 2000); (c) current L2 grammar learning theory (Ellis, 2006); and (d) computer-assisted language learning (CALL) theory (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

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As shown in Table 2, effectiveness of social media on foreign language learning was found primarily in English writing among the six studies. The other three studies reported effectiveness on TOEFL score. When research methods were examined, all the six articles were found to be quantitative studies. Although qualitative empirical studies were found in literature, no qualitative studies qualified as empirical studies due to methods of validity, especially triangulation. Thus, qualitative evidence was not found from our review. In terms of the context, three studies were conducted in Iran (50%). The other three studies were separately conducted in Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand, separately.

## Discussion

*Research question 1: How are theory and framework used to integrate social media into foreign language learning and how have these been developed?*

Result reveals that large amounts of different theories and frameworks have been utilized for different purposes to assist with the integration and utilization of social media in foreign language learning. For example, TAM was used to predict a students' attitudes towards the ease of use and usefulness of using social media in foreign language learning, while social constructivist theory was used to understand students' online interactions and collaborations. Empirical evidence found that social media had the potential to improve students' writing skills, especially grammar and writing fluency (Kitchakarn, 2016). Dizon (2016) reported that students made significant improvement on writing fluency when Facebook was introduced in class. If TOEFL score could be considered as learning performance as reported by Akbari, Pilot, and Simons (2015), Akbari, Naderi, Simons, and Pilot (2016), and Khoshnoud and Karbalaei (2014), we could also make the case that social media, especially Facebook, could improve a student's learning performance.

The utilization of social media was found to have contextual features (Derakhshan, & Hasanabbasi, 2015; Richards, 2015). The use of social media is different and depends on the context. It seems that there was a relationship between the choice of social media tools and the context of using those tools. The analysis also revealed that theoretical development was quite slow in foreign language learning supported by social media. Theoretical understanding of these frameworks and interpretation for subsequent application relied heavily on theories from other disciplines, such as social constructivist theory. However, the borrowed theories may not be sufficient and appropriate to understand the unique characteristics of the foreign language learning process in social media settings. For example, Akbari, Naderi, Simons, and Pilot (2016) utilized self-determination theory in the study and TOEFL score was examined to determine the

effectiveness of Facebook. Social media environments require foreign language learners to not only remember the language codes but also utilize those codes immediately to make sense of people's behaviors, interpret the symbols, and understand the culture. However, self-determination is a theory of motivation and is concerned with people's inherent growth; it is insufficient to understand the foreign language learning process and conclude that social media is effective in improving foreign language learning performance. Unfortunately, theories or frameworks regarding the foreign language learning process are scarce in literature.

*Research question 2: What empirical evidence of the effectiveness of social media in foreign language learning is found in research?*

The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of social media in learning depended on the characteristics of the tools chosen and the instructional goals as shown in Liu, Abe, Cao, Liu, Ok, Park, Parrish and Sardegna's (2015) study. Most social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are text-based tools that require users to make written posts (Dogoriti, Pange, & Anderson, 2014). Students could develop writing skills through making their own posts and reading other students' posts. Few studies have carefully considered the characteristics of the tools and how these tools' characteristics could be utilized to achieve the instructional goals. This may be the reason that why much empirical evidence was only found in English writing, not in the areas of speaking, listening, and reading. Although empirical evidence was found in writing skills, it cannot be generalized that social media was effective in improving foreign language learning and specifically, it cannot be generalized to other areas of speaking, reading, and listening. For future research the effectiveness of social media in reading, speaking, and listening needs further investigation.

*Research questions 3: How have the cultural aspects of countries that use the language have been addressed in literature?*

Regarding the culture in foreign language learning, although the link between culture and foreign language learning has been widely recognized, the roles of culture have rarely been addressed in the studies focusing on social media supporting foreign language learning. However, there are theoretical discussions in literature that support the potential of social media in the area of functional and cognitive perspectives of the culture. Hasan, Rashid, Yunus, Mohamed, and Zulkifli, (2016) advocated that sociocultural theory could be used as a framework to understand how social media facilitated students to make sense of people's behaviors in another culture. They explained that sociocultural theory emphasized the social and cultural impact on human behaviors and social media was found to provide an environment to understand those social and cultural impacts through social interaction and collaboration. In Saaty's (2015) study, social constructivist theory and affective filter hypothesis were discussed, suggesting that social media could reduce students' risk-taking and enhance motivations and sense-makings of personal experiences, histories, and beliefs through meaningful interactions. However, empirical evidence was insufficient in demonstrating the effectiveness of social media in supporting the functional and cognitive perspectives. Although effectiveness of social media was found in EFL writing and TOEFL scores as shown in Table 2, behavioral and symbolic perspectives of culture were not found in those studies if the details of the exams were investigated. For example, Ahmed (2015), Dizon (2016), and Wang and Chen (2013) examined students' writing but the details of those writing tasks were not included. Thus, we could not determine whether cultural perspectives were considered; consequently, the studies could not be considered as evidence to support the notion. The same issue was found in the Singman's (2012) and Kitchakarn's (2016) studies, which examined students' grammar but details of the grammar exams were absent.

In terms of behavioral and symbolic perspectives of culture, neither theoretical discussions nor empirical studies were found in literature. The possible explanation is the absence of learning activities' details in the studies. Thus, it is difficult to determine if researchers have considered behavioral and symbolic perspectives or not. However, the research team for this study believes that these two perspectives have been addressed to some extent in the studies. In addition, Kitchakarn (2016) mentioned that the instructor gave students the writing topics. Therefore, some of the writing topics may have contained the task of describing the reasons of some patterned behaviors or cultural products, such as artistic achievement. A further instructional content analysis is required to determine behavioral and symbolic perspectives of culture in social media supported foreign language learning.

### **Summary**

In summary, research of social media in foreign language is still in infancy stage and the effectiveness of using social media to improve foreign language learning is not as positive as expected by the authors. Although this article only considered foreign learning performance in empirical studies, it was noticed that positive findings are reported in other areas, such as motivation, engagement, interaction, and collaboration. However, in terms of performance, positive finding in foreign language learning was only found in EFL writing.

This contradicting finding may be attributed to the low transformation rate between foreign language learning performance and motivation, engagement, interaction, and collaboration. It has been demonstrated that there is positive relationship between foreign learning performance and motivation, engagement, interaction, and collaboration (Kitchakarn, 2016). However, how much motivation, engagement, interaction, and collaboration can be transformed to learning performance is uncertain. Based on the studies we have reviewed in this article, it seems that the transformation rate from increased motivation, engagement, interaction, and collaboration to learning performance is quite low. Although students are motivated and highly engaged in social media supported foreign language learning environment, effectiveness was only found in EFL writing because most social media are written communication tools and interaction and collaboration occur in written form. It provides more opportunity for students to observe and practice writing, which has improved student's writing performance.

### **Conclusion**

Although culture does have impact on the choice of social media tools and the subsequent effectiveness of social media in foreign language learning, the main goal remains the same. That is, empowering students with the abilities to communicate with people in other contexts and understand the world from different perspectives through improving students foreign language learning skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This review has raised some questions that need more research. For example, does social media's presence in foreign language learning classrooms indicate that students are using different ways to construct foreign language in the context of social media? Does the emerging empirical evidence from literature across different cultures confirm the fundamental change of foreign language learning process? More theoretical and empirical explorations are needed to answer these questions.

Thus, future research can be directed to (a) explore theories and frameworks that developed specifically for integrating social media into foreign language learning, (b) conduct

more rigorous qualitative studies to explore the foreign language learning process, (c) explore the effectiveness of social media in other areas of foreign language learning performance, especially in speaking, listening, and reading, (d) switch the research interest from examining students' attitudes, engagements, and motivations to understanding foreign language learning process in social media environments and appropriateness of characteristics of social media in supporting the learning process, and (e) understand the digital culture in social media environments and whether exposing foreign language students to the social media environments will enhance their understandings and interpretations of the "true" culture.

In addition, potential international collaboration opportunities are provided in this article to help foreign language educators better support students' learning needs. First, international partners are called to notice the importance of using social media in foreign language learning, along with cultural concern. Second, the lack of theoretical and empirical studies on using social media in foreign language learning needs the world's attention. Last, but not the least, Social media helps students break the geographic boundaries in foreign language learning. We encourage instructors, teachers, scholars worldwide to work together to build an integrated foreign language learning environment via social media, in order to provide a place where our students could have a better access to the foreign language, to the culture of the foreign language, and to the people who speak the language.

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