

Instagram in the Foreign Language Classroom: Considerations and Limitations

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Abstract

Social networking sites have become part of the daily life of many individuals, including learners and teachers, who use technology and web-based social platforms as means of regular digital interactions. The popularity of social networking sites has dramatically increased over the last decade, especially among younger adults. Nevertheless, despite their potential of creating connections between people, languages, and cultures they have yet to be widely embraced in the context of language education. Furthermore, while research studies have focused on the integration of Facebook and Twitter in the language classroom setting, there is a lack of studies discussing the use of Instagram to foster cultural understanding. This exploratory paper addresses this gap by discussing how Instagram may be used by language learners to explore different cultures, create e-portfolios, and promote the understanding of diverse habits and practices.

Keywords: Instagram, critical thinking, foreign language education, cultural understanding

Introduction

The fast development in the technology landscape and the increasing popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) have created new habits of interaction and communication among individuals. Today, SNSs are used for many purposes, such as keeping in touch with family and friends, staying up to date with news and current events, and sharing details about personal lives. In the field of language learning, technology and SNSs have made foreign languages (FLs) and cultures easily accessible, inspiring educators to integrate such platforms in the language classroom (e.g., Al-Ali, 2014; Barrot, 2016; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Gikas & Grant, 2013; Kim et al., 2011; Mills, 2011; Mitchell, 2012; Mompean & Fouz-González, 2016; Stevenson & Liu, 2010). SNSs offer authentic digital resources that may not be accessible otherwise, while also providing opportunities for meaningful and contextualized communication (Sykes et al., 2008). In relation to the cultural dimension of language, technology, and the internet, SNSs provide a significant amount of authentic digital resources that can be used to learn and understand practices and perspectives of language speakers from around the world (Borau et al., 2009). Furthermore, the availability of freely accessible multimodal materials on SNSs, such as images and videos, empowers language learners in becoming attentive analyzers of the studied language and culture, while enabling them to reflect on elements not found in traditional language textbooks (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012).

Although researchers have analyzed the implementation of SNSs in language learning and pedagogy (e.g., Akbari et al., 2016; Dizon, 2016; Reinhardt & Ryu, 2014; Yen et al., 2015), there is a lack of studies investigating how Instagram, an image-based SNS, can be utilized in the language classroom, especially from the perspective of cultural understanding.

The aim of this paper is to address this gap by discussing how Instagram can be used to promote critical thinking and cultural understanding among language learners. The first section provides an overview of how SNSs have been used in the context of language education. Section two reviews definitions of culture and addresses the concept of cultural understanding. Next, affordances and limitations of Instagram are discussed, and finally, an explanation of how Instagram can be used by language learners to create e-portfolios for cultural understanding is provided.

Literature Review

Social Networking Sites and Foreign Language Learning

SNSs are highly interactive platforms where individuals participate in the creation and co-creation of content (Sim & Pop, 2014). Examples of SNSs include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat, among others. While each one of these platforms allows users to perform different tasks, they all are free, easy to access, and allow the sharing of digital posts with a restricted or more open audience. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) an increasing body of research has explored how SNSs can be effectively used by teachers and students to improve language learning. Rosen (2010) reported that SNSs offer opportunities for personalization, collaboration, synchronous and asynchronous communication, social interaction, and exchange of rich multimedia information. Along with these advantages, learners can become navigators of knowledge and content creators (Luckin et al., 2009). With the growing spread of SNSs, students are no longer limited to the information presented by the teacher and the textbook. Rather, students can explore new cultures and practices from external resources such as SNSs, which become a valuable asset providing a window on real-life cultural practices.

Research on SNSs indicates that platforms as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can enhance language learning when purposefully utilized. Mompean and Fouz-González (2016) looked at how Twitter can be used by English language learners to improve the pronunciation of difficult words. Results showed that participants were actively engaged in the use of Twitter and the pronunciation of the targeted words improved. In another study, Borau et al. (2009) examined how Twitter supported interactions with English speakers, while also promoting English learners' cultural competence. Their findings indicate that Twitter allowed students to get in contact with people from different countries on a casual basis, provided access to new cultural facets, and thus contributed to participants' cultural competence. Blattner and Fiori (2009) examined the potential of using Facebook in the educational context and found that this SNS supported the development of sociopragmatic competence among language learners. Similarly, Blattner and Lomicka (2012) explored how Facebook, in an intermediate French course, enhanced the awareness of sociopragmatic elements. Their results suggest that Facebook forums can support the awareness of sociopragmatic elements by transcending cultural and national boundaries. Lomicka and Lord (2016) illustrated how students can engage in the development of cultural and linguistic awareness through the use of SNSs. For instance, SNSs that tend to focus on written discourse (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) can be used to promote awareness of language structures and sociocultural aspects through the observation of interactions among language users.

More recent studies have focused on the implications of Instagram for language learning. For example, Khalitova and Gimaletdinova (2016) conducted a case study in which participants, who were advanced English learners, were required to complete listening and comprehension tasks outside of the classroom on their own mobile devices through the Instagram application. Results revealed that those students who were new to SNSs for language learning improved their listening comprehension skills and increased their motivation.

Similarly, Kelly (2015) explored the use of Instagram to increase writing proficiency by English learners from beginner to advanced levels. Students published two Instagram posts per week over a five-week period and received corrective feedback about their writing. The findings showed that Instagram and the corrective feedback helped improve learners' vocabulary and grammatical accuracy, while also contributing to their motivation. Overall, there seems to be a general agreement that SNSs can bring positive outcomes to language learners. Nevertheless, more research is necessary to determine how Instagram can be used by language learners, from a critical thinking perspective, to foster cultural understanding and to challenge assumptions and stereotypes toward other cultures.

Cultural Understanding: A Definition

In the literature the construct of culture has many definitions. While it is unlikely that scholars will reach a consensus regarding a single definition of culture, for the aim of this paper it is important to clearly define culture, and what it signifies to develop cultural understanding in the context of FL education. A relevant definition of culture is the one provided by Lado (1997), who describes cultures as “systems of patterned behaviors that are both systematic and shared” (p. 40). These systems express culture-specific meaning which might differ depending on several factors, such as age, gender, religion, geography, and so forth (Kramsch, 1993, 2013). Patterned behaviors are dynamic and change over time (Schulz, 2007). Other scholars define cultural learning as “the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively” (Paige et al., 2003, p. 177). This definition captures culture as a dynamic and developmental element comprising different dimensions. It also acknowledges culture as a changing aspect of a country, made of varying, shared, and specific behaviors, skills, and attitudes. Consequently, a tentative definition of cultural understanding may be the ability of the learner to recognize culture as a dynamic element shaped by several factors which change across groups and individuals.

According to Schulz (2007) there are five fundamental pedagogical objectives for the development of cultural learning. Two of those objectives will be used to define cultural understanding in the present article. The first objective states, “students recognize stereotypes or generalizations about the home and target cultures and evaluate them in terms of the amount of substantiating evidence” (p. 17), and the second one reports, “students develop and demonstrate an awareness that each language and culture has culture-conditioned images and culture-specific connotations of some words, phrases, proverbs, idiomatic formulations, gestures, etc.” (p. 17). In both objectives it is important to recognize that cultural learning implies the ability to identify stereotypes and generalizations, as well as the competence to evaluate culture as a component of countries shaped by culturally-specific elements.

Thus, in this paper cultural understanding will be defined considering Lado (1971), Paige et al. (2003), and Schulz's (2007) definitions. Cultural understanding can be defined as *the ability to acknowledge the studied culture(s) as a shared, dynamic and shifting aspect of countries and the capability to recognize and evaluate specific characteristics, whether concrete or abstract, generalization, and stereotypes of such culture(s)*. SNSs offer a variety of media that illustrate the numerous facets and shared practices of people living in other countries. The purposeful use of SNSs, especially Instagram, could support the development of students' cultural understanding. In the next section, affordances and limitations of Instagram for FL education, with a focus on culture, are discussed.

Instagram in the Foreign Language Classroom

Affordances and Limitations

Instagram is a SNS largely used as a mobile application to instantly share images, videos, and texts with virtually anyone in the world. Launched in October 2010, Instagram is defined as “a mobile social networking site that allows users to post images accompanied by a short caption” (Whiddon, 2016, p. 10). Instagram also allows the publishing of short videos, which can provide input similar to authentic communication (Khalitova & Gimalitdinova, 2016). The number of Instagram users has rapidly increased since its launch, and recently the online community has grown to over one billion users based in several different countries, with millions of photos shared each day (Instagram Press, 2019). Furthermore, based on research from the Pew Research Center (2019), in the United States 67% of Instagram users are between the ages of 18 and 29, and undergraduate students at universities in the United States are usually within this age range. SNSs in general are very popular among young adults (Counts & Fisher, 2010; Dunn, 2013; Lunden, 2014; Oliveira, 2014), and Instagram can be used in the language classroom to explore authentic cultural practices, habits, and perspectives of language users, considering the ability to create and share media from the life of everyday. The social influence of Instagram and its popularity in many different countries offer a variety of authentic cultural resources for the FL language classroom.

There are several reasons to use Instagram to promote cultural understanding. First, as explained above Instagram is a SNS used by an increasing number of users around the globe. In the United States more than half of users are in the same age range as most college students, making Instagram a popular SNS among younger people. On Instagram learners can find language speakers with shared interests allowing for genuine and authentic written conversations (Whiddon, 2016). The digital media shared by language users can be easily accessed, viewed, and saved in a digital portfolio (or collections) within the same SNS. As opposed to other SNSs, Instagram has an open and public interface that facilitates searching and finding users, as well as media shared by others, with the hashtag function. Although there is the option to create a private profile, the matter of privacy is less central on Instagram as compared to other SNSs, such as Facebook. While on Facebook users generally interact with individuals in their own circle of acquaintances, on Instagram users explore, view, and interact with posts published by strangers. Nevertheless, to use these SNSs, including Instagram, students have to create an account, whether private or public, and share some personal information, such as name and email. This issue of privacy could be problematic, especially among younger students, but ultimately it is up to the teacher to decide how to address such matter, perhaps by creating a shared account for the classroom accessible by every student without having to share private information.

For the development of cultural understanding, with the search of specific vocabulary in the target language and the hashtag function, learners can find media or posts tagged with that specific vocabulary and published by language users. Learners can also follow relevant users, from the countries where the language is spoken, who share photos and videos, with captions in the FL, related to their daily life. On Instagram language learners have access to many different facets since there are users from different backgrounds who share their own perspectives and everyday experiences. For instance, in Italy the simple action of drinking espresso differs between the northern and the southern regions. While the variation of this basic activity might not be addressed in the FL textbook, on Instagram it is possible to find Italian speakers from different regions who share their own varying practices of drinking espresso at an Italian coffee shop as well as at home. It is also possible to find coffee-related practices from around the world, for example the use of stovetop coffee makers outside of the Italian context and by those who identify with the Italian coffee culture for personal reasons. In fact, there are

many individual differences and sub-cultures beyond regional differences that can be found on SNSs. In terms of teaching affordances, Instagram provides language teachers with free-to-use resources that can supplement cultural topics addressed in the FL textbook. The teacher may also choose to search for cultural topics at home and bring screenshots of Instagram posts to the classroom for students to reflect upon and analyze. Other teaching affordances include interactions and collaborations with language users from around the world and stimulating discussions among language learners through the use of authentic and context-relevant materials.

Instagram can also be used for the creation of e-portfolios given the ease of use and popularity. Private collections on Instagram let users save media published by virtually anybody in e-portfolios. There are also other SNSs that offer the creation of digital collections of images. For instance, Pinterest is another visual-sharing SNS that allows the creation of public or private boards in which content found on the web is gathered. Chun (2008) explains that SNSs allow people to collaborate and be directly involved in the creation of user-generated content. On Instagram, as compared to another SNS as Pinterest, it is the user who creates the content by taking photos or videos of their daily life. On Instagram digital media are instantly created and shared, giving an authentic view on cultural practices. Differently, on Pinterest users usually search and discover content that is created by other people and found on other websites. The conversational nature of Instagram is also applicable to language learning, since users have the opportunity to write captions and comment under published posts. This feature allows users who do not know each other to interact and communicate through a written channel. On Pinterest comments are not as common, and instead it is more usual the simple sharing of photos that when clicked will redirect users to external websites without an interaction between Pinterest users.

While other SNSs (e.g., Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter) can be used in their many functions on both computers and smartphones, Instagram can only be fully utilized on a mobile device since it is not possible to create private collections and share images through a computer. Thus, if Instagram is integrated into the FL curriculum, it is necessary to ensure that students have access to mobile devices to download the application and use all its available features. Another constraint of using Instagram in the language classroom to support cultural understanding is that students might assume that images or videos found on this SNS represent culture as a whole. Since cultures are complex, dynamic, with different layers, it is important that teachers properly inform students about how cultural practices depend on factors such as age and geography. Explaining that the representation of the studied culture on Instagram will differ from user to user is fundamental to successfully integrate and use this SNS in the FL classroom.

Although research has shown that SNSs can be successfully implemented in language learning, some limitations exist. First, it is possible that students experience difficulties in using Instagram for language learning activities. Although as reported by the Pew Research Center (2019) SNSs are widely used among young adults, some students might not be familiar with this specific SNS and understanding how to use the hashtag function, searching media published by other language users, and creating e-portfolios might be challenging. For this reason, training and tutorials will be of central importance to ensure a successful use of the selected SNS. Additionally, if students perceive SNSs as technology tools solely designated for entertainment purposes, and not for educational goals, a lack of participation might be possible. That is, some students might think that Instagram does not belong in the FL classroom and might choose to not use it as assigned by the teacher. In this case, it is important to explain to students the value that SNSs bring to language learning and allocate specific time for their purposeful use inside and outside the classroom. Accessibility is another issue worth considering, since some students might own cellphones that are not compatible with SNSs or

the Instagram application. In the latter case, since it is not possible to upload photos or create e-portfolios from a desktop computer or laptop, those students will not be able to participate in Instagram-based activities. Thus, the teacher might decide to utilize Instagram only in the classroom context, when students can share their devices. It is also worth noting that some students might feel insecure by the fact that they do not own the newest devices to use SNSs. Limitations from a teacher standpoint include potential technology-related issues, and thus loss of class time, as well as encountering cultural topics that could be offensive or problematic for language learners due to politics, religious beliefs, and so forth. For these reasons, it is important that the teacher plans well ahead how the selected SNS will be used in the classroom by students.

Creating E-portfolios

In the educational setting portfolios have been used for formative purposes to monitor student learning and to stimulate metacognitive reflection on their progress, and for summative purposes to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit (Gikandi et al., 2011). Although the term portfolio can be defined in multiple ways, a representative description of portfolio is: “a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student’s efforts, progress, or achievement in a content area” (Arter & Spandel, 1992, p. 36). Portfolios have been widely used for multiple reasons: to record students’ learning progress, to exhibit goals and achievements, to enable critical thinking and reflection (Donato & McCormick, 1994), among others. The creation of a curated and meaningful portfolio is an intentional process in which students are active, involved, and selective. In the field of SLA, researchers have explored the implementation of portfolios both from a teacher and student perspective, especially in academic writing (Aydin, 2010; Lam, 2013; Romova & Andrew, 2011), showing that portfolios are an effective assessment tool enhancing knowledge and motivation.

Research on the effectiveness of digital or e-portfolios, also defined as digital archives of student work created by learners with the purpose of recording progress, experiences, and self-reflections (Golonka et al., 2014, p. 78), mainly comes from qualitative studies and is based on participants’ self-reported data. Studies have shown mixed reactions from students about the use of e-portfolios, reporting positive attitudes (Chang et al., 2004; Driessen et al., 2007) as well as negative beliefs about their usefulness for reflection purposes. In the latter case, negatives beliefs appear to be mostly due to the ongoing cyclical process of collecting and reviewing information (Kocoglu, 2008). Other studies have explored the use of SNSs for the creation of e-portfolios, focusing on how Facebook could be implemented in the language classroom (Hiradhar & Gray, 2008; Barrot, 2016). Golonka et al. (2014) explained that e-portfolios are valuable because they support learner autonomy and self-assessment, they emphasize the learning process and the final product of learning, and they facilitate the monitoring of progress as well as the setting of clear objectives. Although the strengths of implementing e-portfolios for language learning have been explored, to date the use of Instagram as an e-portfolio to enhance the understanding of cultures has not been examined. The use of e-portfolios through Instagram to support cultural understanding can involve students’ creation of a private or shared collection of images related to a specific cultural topic, followed by reflections in the comment sections about those images and how they relate to students’ own prior understanding of the topic they selected. Cultural topics could include festivities, work habits, dress habits, family traditions, and so forth. Students can also evaluate language use in relation to specific Instagram posts and then discuss how language is related to a specific cultural context. Through the creation of Instagram-based e-portfolios, students can engage in reflective processes, evaluate media shared by other language users, and gain a deeper understanding of culture. With the use of specific searches, teachers and language

learners can find an extensive amount of culturally-related digital materials that will provide interesting insights and different views.

Conclusions

This paper discussed SNSs for language learning purposes. It has been argued that SNSs can be beneficial for learners, since they can increase motivation and interest in the studied language, as well as provide authentic digital materials and opportunities for interactions with native speakers. The exposure to practices of the studied culture, although solely in a virtual manner, can help students in gaining a better understanding of the different cultural facets that are part of other countries. Among other SNSs, on Instagram users have the opportunity to find and create images, videos, and texts shared with other people, thus producing a connected and socially driven online environment. Instagram offers language learners the opportunity to engage in brief written interactions with FL users. Furthermore, this SNS is fitting for the creation of e-portfolios, which are increasingly used in education, since it enables the saving of media published by other users in a collection, which can be accessed and viewed at any time. Nevertheless, although the implementation of SNSs in the language learning context is appealing, more research is needed to further understand how Instagram can be used in the instructional setting to support cultural understanding and making learning meaningful and effective for language learners. To test the pedagogical benefits of Instagram, language teachers could implement a semester-long e-portfolio activity, where students collect images related to topics discussed in class and then reflect on such topics with peers, at the start of the week in the classroom. Surveying students at the end of the semester could prove useful in better comprehending the effectiveness of this SNSs for cultural understanding. Other research could compare cultural topics as represented in FL textbooks with the same topics as found on Instagram posts shared by language users. Such inquiry could provide interesting insights about cultural representations in commercial pedagogical materials.

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