Harnessing the power of social media to help students learn English

Network uses social networking to link learners for common goals – shared language success and professional growth. Selected tasks and lessons in the Student Book and Workbook invite students to engage in learning activities which address social media and networking. Network presents a range of Internet- and classroom-based activities for students to:

1. Get more practice communicating in English,
2. Make English-speaking friends, and
3. Find a better job in the future.

What are the pedagogical benefits of using social networking?

There are five key benefits to deploying social media in support of English language teaching and learning:

1. Turning social networking into meaningful English-practice opportunities. Social networks such as Facebook allow students to practice new language in an engaging environment. Research support: In a University of Minnesota study (Greenhow, 2008), 16- to 18-year-old students listed increased technology skills as the top takeaway benefit of social networking sites, followed by creativity, being open to new or diverse views, and communication skills.

2. Maximizing authentic input. Social networks provide excellent models for how language is actually used. Students see authentic language ranging from casual conversation to academic discourse. Social media, in the form of tweets, posts, blogs or video sharing, provides an abundant supply of real-life language. Research support: Min Jung Jee (2011) emphasized the opportunities learners using today’s Web 2.0 technology have to get input and feedback from native speakers. Collaborative and face-to-face tools such as Skype and Facebook are an excellent means of providing authenticity because the multimodality (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) they offer mirrors how native speakers interact with each other.

3. Building community. Research shows that language learners are more likely to engage in the learning process and improve their skills when they have a network of classmates, friends, or family to talk to and practice with. Research support: Jacobsen and Forste (2011) used surveys and timed diaries to study the influence of social media on students’ social lives. They found that access to social networking sites gives students greater access to social situations in general, facilitating all relationships. For every hour students spent on social networks, they spent 10 to 15 more minutes in “real-life” interactions than students who did not use social networks.

4. Developing critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is necessary for 21st-century academic and professional success. As students engage more with social media, they develop critical thinking skills by making judgments about the credibility of sources of information. Research support: Yang and Ahn (2007) found that synchronous online discussion promotes critical thinking. In this study, students who participated in online discussion achieved higher scores on a critical-thinking assessment than those who did not participate.

5. Personalizing the learning process. When students can relate learning to their own lives and experiences, they are more likely to understand and remember. Linking the learner’s social networks to coursework is one of the most meaningful ways to engage digital natives and other learners who participate regularly in social networking. Personalization lets students use new language in meaningful communication with existing friends and helps them develop new connections. Research support: Hanh and Kellogg (2005) found that discussions through social media allowed participants more opportunities for successful conversations than face-to-face interactions. There are fewer turn-taking constraints, opportunities to get and keep the “floor” are balanced, and there is a visual record of language interaction that facilitates the negotiation of meaning. The study also reveals that, when working online, learners take on roles that they may be less likely to take on in face-to-face interactions.

References