

Experimenting with Snapchat in a University EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This article illustrates one professor's experiment with using Snapchat in a university EFL classroom. Snapchat has become impossible to ignore and this study proves that it can be beneficial to students. This study shows how the use of Snapchat can engage students and encourage them to practice English outside the classroom.

Keywords: Snapchat, social media in classroom, EFL education, technology in classroom

1. Review of the Literature

1.1 Introduction

There has always been controversy regarding the value of using social media in the classroom. Some teachers feel that social media has no place in the classroom and complain about their student's addiction to their cell phone. Others feel that social media does have a place in the classroom. Heatley and Lattimer (2013) claimed that "social media is the most cost-effective way to expand learning outside the four walls of your classroom" (p. 8). Teachers should be "creative and up-to-date with the current technology in order to keep up with the fast-paced society" (Espinosa, 2015, p.2210). Much research has been conducted about the use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, podcasts, and wikis in the classroom, but little has been reported yet on the use of Snapchat in the classroom.

1.2 Snapchat in the Classroom

Snapchat is a social networking and multimedia mobile application that allows users to share photos, videos, and messages that disappear within a short period of time. Snapchat has around 150 million users daily globally and one study reported that 77% of college students use Snapchat daily (Shontell, 2014). Snap, Inc (Snapchat's parent company) has "quietly become one of the world's most innovative and influential consumer technology companies" and is "pioneering a model of social networking that feels more intimate and authentic than the Facebook-led ideas that now dominate the online world" (Farhad, 2016, p.1). Educators have taken notice. University recruiters have begun using Snapchat aimed at prospective students to give them a more immersive and engaging platform (Dreid, 2016). A Sioux Falls school district in South Dakota has added a Snapchat account in an effort to connect with students and engage them with "fun stories or promotional messages" (Raposa, 2017). According to Zmikly (2016), "Snapchat is becoming impossible to ignore" and it has "a rapidly growing user base and content reaching 41 percent of all 18-to-34-year-olds in the United States" (p. 1).

A small but growing number of teachers have begun using Snapchat as a way to push more learning outside of the classroom and onto their students' smartphones (Will, 2016). The saying goes, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" and that is the idea behind teachers embracing Snapchat (Lee, 2016). According to a NPR story, adjunct professor Michael Britt from Marist College in New York, has been using Snapchat in his introductory psychology class by posting "snaps" of real life examples of what is being taught in class right before exams so students will look at them while they are studying and he estimates that 90% of his students use the Snapchats to study (Lee, 2016). One high school library media specialist used Snapchat to help teach Homer's epic poem, The Odyssey, by having students represent Odysseus' journey in 10 second snaps (Lawrence, 2017). Students created characters with emojis, designed backgrounds with filters, and used face-swap to turn a student into a cyclops (Lawrence, 2017). Lawrence (2017) reported, "Excitement filled the library as our formerly reluctant students brought their storyboards to life" (p. 16).

A French tutor in Ireland uses Snapchat with her students by adopting a different persona, Madame Menton, to give "colorful lessons with a dollop of good humor" (O'Brien, 2016, p.12). The tutor said that using Snapchat is very effective in reinforcing learning and helping to explain challenging concepts, as well as it keeps students engaged (O'Brien, 2016). O'Brien (2016) offered these tips for using snapchat stories for class: "reminders of upcoming homework, projects, or tests and as bite-sized lessons or as a way to make connections within the curriculum" and this tip for starting a discussion before class: "by asking an interesting question on Snapchat beforehand. This gives students time to think about the topic" (p.12).

Matt Miller (2017) blogged about 15 different ways a teacher can use Snapchat in the classroom, ranging from vocabulary lessons to reminders to congratulating your students. He highlighted how to engage students with humorous uses of content, how to use speech bubbles, and how to use Snapchat to post a virtual study session. In another education blog, KQED Learning, Walter (2017) also gives similar tips and suggested, "Rather than being reactive about new technology in our classrooms, we should look for ways to be proactive

and utilize Snapchat as a learning tool instead of viewing it as a distraction” (p. 1). Walter (2017) outlined the advantages of allowing the students to create the content:

1. Allowing students to create and share Snapchat content gives students ownership over their learning outcomes and affirms students’ voice.
2. It gives students an authentic learning opportunity to model responsible digital citizenship.
3. Creation is the highest level of critical thinking in terms of digital literacy. (p.1)

In an online blog, Stockton University public relations professor Ai Zhang (2016) gave a poignant reason for using Snapchat in her classroom, “But the point is, sharing some parts of myself in my ‘natural environment’ helps build rapport with students that wouldn’t otherwise exist. And this is extremely helpful for facilitating their learning and engagement in the classroom” (p. 1). Zhang (2016) also highlighted the benefits of using Snapchat question and answer sessions, as well as using Snapchat as a platform to coach and mentor students.

Snapchat is an app that works on smartphones and not every student has a smartphone; therefore, it is advised to use Snapchat as a resource and not a requirement (Zmikly, 2016). Zmikly (2016) also advised teachers to use a “class account”, not their personal Snapchat account. Walter (2017) advised teachers to establish goals for their use of Snapchat in the classroom (for example, maybe a teacher wants to use Snapchat for reminders to students, or for class content, or to showcase class activities) and to have a clear purpose before they begin. Walter (2017) also recommended to know the school or district’s policies regarding the use of social media, as well as the teacher developing their own policies for their classroom use of Snapchat.

2. Research Purpose

After reviewing the literature about using Snapchat in the classroom, I was excited to give it a try. This led me to the research question, “Will using Snapchat with university EFL students increase their practice of English outside the classroom?”

2.1 Methodology

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 9 university students at a small private university in Quito, Ecuador in a B2 level English intersemester (summer intensive 3-week) class. All students were undergraduate students with majors in business, mechatronics, diplomacy, or international relations. There were 4 female students and 5 male students, ranging in age from 19 to 22 years. All of the students speak Spanish as their native language.

2.3 Procedures

On the first day of class, I asked the students, “Who uses Snapchat?” and all 9 hands went up. I decided that using Snapchat as a pilot study with this class would be a great opportunity to see if Snapchat encouraged more practice of English outside the classroom. I set up a separate Snapchat account for the class (I did not want to use my personal account). I informed my students that I would post Snapchats that require some sort of response from them (writing or speaking) for extra credit points to be added at the end of the class.

I posted daily Snapchats for 11 days. I posted them in the mornings before class started. Sometimes I posed questions to introduce that day’s topic. For example, before studying a unit on immigration I asked the question “If you could move to any country, where would it be and why?” I posed my questions with a funny filter and/or voice and the students answered with filters and voice changers as well. I posted Snapchats about new vocabulary and new grammar with students Snapchating examples. I asked their opinions on topics from class and to give examples. After the course, I then interviewed some of the students to get their opinions on the use of Snapchat in the classroom.

2.4 Findings and Discussion

Out of the 9 students, 7 participated in the Snapchat posts and 2 did not. From the 11 days of Snapchat posts, here is how many times each student responded:

- Student 1= 5
- Student 2= 2
- Student 3= 16
- Student 4= 11
- Student 5= 3
- Student 6= 5
- Student 7= 8

As an English teacher, these are good results to see from my students. Student 3 practiced English at least 16 times outside the classroom and I got to hear and see his practice. I asked Student 3 if he enjoyed using Snapchat in English class and he said, “It was not like homework. I did them because they were fun.” When

asked if teachers should use Snapchat, Student 3 commented, “Yes, they should because it improves the student-teacher relationship”. Student 4 reported “I have never had a teacher use Snapchat before and it was incredible. It helped me to remember the important things.” Student 6 said, “Using Snapchat was interesting and interactive. It was a benefit for extra credit because we are already using Snapchat.” Student 8 said, “It was a good way to do activities in English and a different way to use technology.” Student 7 reported, “It helped me to think in English and it was convenient because I already use Snapchat.”

These interviews were helpful for me to determine that using Snapchat in my classroom worked. My students were participating and having fun. They were practicing English. They told me they looked forward to the morning Snapchat posts. I plan to continue using Snapchat in my English classroom and look forward to new ways to incorporate this technology.

3. Conclusion

The use of Snapchat in my university EFL classroom was a success. Students were engaged and excited about it. They used this social media technology to practice English outside the classroom. Heatley and Lattimer (2013) said “social media not only enables teachers and students to connect with one another, but it also allows for continued learning outside traditional classroom learning hours. As technology continues to require a larger presence in our everyday lives, social media will become a necessity for classroom engagement” (p. 9). Teachers should take advantage of the technology that is available. As teachers we must accept the fact that our students are always online and that may be the best way to reach them in the way they are comfortable. Zucker (2008) claimed with the advancement of technology new opportunities are offered to students. Students are given more access and more interaction, which increases their chances of achievement (Zucker, 2008).

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