Language Learning with Social Media: A Communicative Language Unit

Denver Beirne

Asia University

Contained within the pages of Web content is a boundless repository of natural, contextual language in every conceivable genre and style. These resources can be powerful tools for learners to pursue their language goals. However, the use of social media and its communicative language conventions in formal education remains limited. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate this untapped potential as it relates to language education. The paper explores this theme by describing an implementation of a social media unit in a communicative English class. The unit aims to give learners an understanding of the communicative styles of social media and video-sharing platforms. Students choose web content to analyse and then imitate the linguistic patterns in output activities designed to practice this authentic language in real-world contexts. The unit focuses on the platforms of Twitter and YouTube but also exposes learners to a wide variety of web applications through student-selected content. Thus, through extensive practice, learners improve their understanding of English use on the internet and enhance their general communication skills.

On average, from 2014 to 2021, Japanese people between 10 and 17 years old spent 263 minutes (4 hours, 23 minutes) online, a figure which has increased steadily (Statista, 2022). Moreover, around 91.6 percent of those aged 17 to 19 were using social media in 2020 (Statista, 2021). These data illuminate the engagement young people in Japan have with the internet and social networking sites (SNS) in particular. These sites fall under the umbrella term of Web 2.0, which are the web technologies that facilitate user interaction and collaboration through user-generated content. An inquiry initiated in the UK in 2009 to investigate the potential uses of Web 2.0 concluded that "[active learning] ... driven by process rather than content... helps students become self-directed and

independent learners. Web 2.0 is well suited to serving and supporting this type of learning" (JISC, 2009, p. 8).

There are numerous ways in which these technologies can support active, student-centred and autonomous learning. According to Chartrand (2012), using SNS in the classroom can motivate learners to engage more meaningfully with learning materials and facilitate an authentic experience of language usage in context. One example of these motivational forces is described in a study using Twitter to teach a literature class at the University of California. The paper found that "students soon embraced Twitter as a collaboration tool, and increasingly came to class with improved attitudes toward, and readiness for class discussions" (Jones, 2015, p. 91).

Various studies have added support for the authenticity of the language texts on social media when applied in the classroom. Moreover, they also highlighted the cultural elements of spoken English, such as accents, dialect, and slang, which the platforms can illuminate (Chawinga, 2017; Derewianka, 2008; Ghasemi et al., 2011). Consequently, web content allows learners to move beyond the staged dialogues of textbooks onto more natural, organic English, which can be (self) selected to be relevant to the learner. Social media allows educators to access texts in an unlimited array of styles and genres of language. In addition, Jarvis (2004) believes that web technologies can also enrich learning by assisting teachers in structuring lessons in more meaningful and interactive ways. Therefore, web technologies can make learning more authentic, meaningful, and motivational, leading to increased self-study and autonomy. Consequently, in the words of Dzvapatsva et al. (2014), "[with] electronic media, the world becomes the classroom, available 24/7" (Literature review, para. 1).

Despite this body of evidence, penetration of web technologies into language classrooms remains limited at best. This paper describes a process for aiding students to explore social media in English and to become confident in using these platforms independently as tools to enjoy their interests while organically improving their linguistic, cultural, and digital literacies. Therefore, this endeavour aims to facilitate learners with the language and conventions that enable them to transfer their natural enjoyment of social media into the English-

speaking digital domain. The following section describes the implementation of the social media unit.

The Social Media Unit

This unit was employed with classes of 15–25 pre-intermediate to intermediate level first-year English majors, which met for four 90-minute lessons each week. All the students used iPads and had access to Wi-Fi. This unit was completed over five weeks, around 20 lessons in total, as outlined below.

Week 1 Introductions, definitions and terms

Week 2 Social media survey and presentation

Week 3 Video interview about social media use

Week 4 YouTuber: Project preparation

Week 5 Project: Student created YouTube videos

Week 1: Introductions, Definitions and Terms

Students are initially given common social media vocabulary terms to help them conceptualise and discuss the topic in English, such as URL, browser, subscribe, tag, trending, thread, and post. As the students progress through the unit, they source their own vocabulary lists from the materials they select so their learning remains up to date and relevant.

After students learn this basic vocabulary, the teacher then gives them more complex and nuanced terms which groups explain to the rest of the class. Each group consists of a Leader, Facilitator, Spokesperson, and Slide Maker. The groups create one or two slides per term using images, pictures, and/or video to provide their explanations with an example. Figure 1 depicts an example slide learners created to define terms with illustrative explanations.

Groups complete the preparation in 15–20 minutes and then give 2–3-minute presentations on their term, with each member being mandated to speak. The application Quizlet is then used to store the vocabulary. The software has a variety of learning modes to help students assimilate the terms independently, as well as games that can be used as warm-up activities to learn competitively in class.

Lesson 2 focuses on discussions facilitated by a worksheet. The conversations

Troll	Trolling
People who make malicious(bad) comments or post unrelated to the content	Make malicious comments
Example: (Tik Tok' comment) A: DON'T POST YOUR FACE B: stop saying that! C:Please don't feed the troll. (Meaning - Don't care the troll)	

Figure 1. Example of an illustrative explanation of a vocabulary item

have students practice some of the vocabulary from lesson 1 and use it to think critically about online personas, unrealistic expectations of some online posts, and (online) role models. Students are aware of these issues to some degree, but these activities allow the opportunity to reflect more deeply and express their ideas in English.

Initially, groups of four students discuss the following general questions:

- Are social media friends/followers different to regular friends? How/Why?
- Are your friends' posts interesting? What kind of posts are interesting?
- Are your friends' posts true, 100%

They then give feedback on their answers to facilitate broader class discussions. Then, the class watches and discusses the video *What's on Your Mind?* (HigtonBros, 2014), which depicts the gap between one person's online posts and offline reality. Finally, students watch and discuss the video *Time-lapse Shows Model's Radical Photoshop Transformation* (Litasscatalogue, 2016) along with two contrasting images of the model Kate Moss, one photoshopped and one unaltered.

The next lesson focuses on teaching the students about some structures

underpinning social media language, which will be outlined briefly here but is described in more detail in Beirne (2021). Students are first introduced to the conventions of English language abbreviations and their deployment in netspeak, using the slide in Figure 2, summarised and simplified from the work of Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 67) and Shortis (2007, p. 25).

The teacher gives groups of four students the challenge of creating original abbreviations, using these rules, which the other groups will attempt to decode, for points in a quiz. Next, groups use these rules and other social media conventions, such as hashtags, to rewrite an overly formal message in the style of a social media post (e.g., Twitter). Finally, the teacher creates a Google document formatted to resemble a Twitter feed. Students then post messages to each other using a 280-character limitation, which should focus on authentic, abbreviated, multi-modal messages. This document is then revisited and appended at various points in the unit. Indeed, posting could continue for the rest of the semester or academic year if desired.

In the final class of Week 1, students demonstrate a lesser-known digital application to small groups. Groups are rotated to repeat the activity, so students get more practice and see a wider variety of applications. The goal of this activity

Ways to Abbreviate or Rewrite

1. **First letter from each word - LOL, YOLO**

2. **Phonetic spelling (spell as it sounds) – wimmin, fone**
    a. **Substitute a number for sound (syllable) - 4u, GR8**
    b. **Substitute a letter for sound (syllable) – cu, b4**
    c. **Eye dialect (simpler but unusual) - phat, cuz, luv, bigga, woz**

3. **Consonant Writing (remove vowels) – pls, Bldg, Rd**

4. **Clipping - demo, phone, k (ok)**

5. **Online styles - flickr / wittr, iPhone, aLtErNaTiNg cApS**

Figure 2. Conventions for abbreviating and rewriting in English

is to provide an interactive, tactile demonstration, encouraging reactions, questions, and feedback. Students receive a worksheet with the following questions:

- App/media name
- How often do you use it?
- What does it do?
- What are useful features? (demo)
- How do you use it? (demo)
- What kind of person would you recommend it to?

The teacher also provides a completed worksheet, which they use to demonstrate an application. After the demonstrations, students add their application details to the shared document (Table 1). Each class member then chooses one new application to try for seven days. All members report back one week later in a follow-up activity.

Week 2: Social Media Survey and Presentation

Learners create a survey related to a social media theme using a worksheet with suggestions for appropriate topics. Students should re-use the vocabulary they have learned so far, and they will encounter additional ideas and language in completing the activity. First, students create their questions and then survey their classmates. For homework, students find at least 10 people from outside the class to take their survey. In the university where this unit was implemented, English-speaking staff, peers, and exchange students are conveniently available by appointment or on request. However, if this facility is not available, there are alternative options. For example, during the pandemic, students used online polls

Table 1

Example of data students provide for their lesser-known applications

Student Name	App Name	Type of App	Give it a try – 7 days
(teacher)	Pinterest	Digital notice board = keep pics, recipes, web pages	

in applications like Twitter, Instagram, or LINE to collect answers from friends and peers.

In the next class, students summarise their replies into meaningful excerpts. If students are not experienced in this kind of data analysis, they should be instructed to look for patterns in their answers, using quantitative means such as graphs, charts, and percentages, while reporting qualitative results as quotations. Sentence starter phrases, such as those following, often help students understand how to organise their answers: "Most students said...," "Some students said...," "One interesting comment was...," "Fifty percent of students thought...," "All the girls in the class said...," "Everyone who uses Twitter thought...." During the activity, students collect new vocabulary, and the teacher again compiles this into a list for students to learn.

The next class is spent creating slides to present students' survey topics, results, and conclusions. Then, the class members finish their slides and practice their presentations in the following lesson. In the final lesson for this week, students present their findings to the whole class.

Week 3: Video Interview About Social Media Use

First, the students practice some interview techniques. These activities help improve students' confidence and fluency on- and off-camera. Students focus on the entertainment style of YouTube by paying attention to follow-on comments/ questions, pacing, and the variety of delivery styles and practice by videoing an interview with someone from outside the class. Learners are shown an excerpt from The Late Late Show entitled *David Beckham Had a Big Influence on Brooklyn's First Tattoo* (2017). The class is then given a comprehension quiz, to focus their attention with a fun activity. After the quiz, students receive the interview technique factsheet shown in Figure 3. The clip is replayed and paused to highlight the points in the guide demonstrated by the video.

To prepare for their final interview, students first practice with classmates by revisiting the activity in which they tried a new application for seven days, using the worksheet and examples in Figure 4. In addition, the learners are given access to exemplary videos from previous students as models for their interviews.

Interview Technique

Beckham and Cordon

Tips for a good interview (imagine this is for your youtube channel)

- make the person feel comfortable (welcome them)
- smile
- introduce
- background information
- opening comments / questions
- don't rush
- think about guests answers and respond
- use active listening: really, oh yeah, I see…
- open body language
- Big gestures
- Leaning forward
- Show interest in your guest and their answers
- big gestures (**little bit** bigger than normal)
- repeat phrases that your guest says
- change tone and volume etc.
- bit cheeky, humour (planned and off the cuff)

Figure 3. Factsheet – Good interview technique

Figure 4. Worksheet - Social media interview practice

Students conduct four 5-minute interviews and reflect on each, using the table at the end of the worksheet. The interviews are videoed to help students review their performance and allow more practice on camera. In the next lesson, students create questions for a 5-minute interview with someone outside the class on a social media topic of their choice. Students then conduct the video interviews for homework. After submission, the teacher can formally grade the interviews or alternatively give structured feedback on good points, bad points, and areas for improvement.

Weeks 4 and 5: YouTube video project

Like the interview process, students learn the fundamentals of the communicative style of the genre by mimicking the professionals: students' favourite YouTubers. Learners first choose a Japanese YouTuber to introduce to their classmates in small groups, using a worksheet designed to help them pick out the key features of good YouTube videos. Then, students repeat this activity with English language YouTubers. An example of one of these worksheets is shown in Figure 5.

These desirable features are compiled into a basic guide, Figure 6, to aid the class in making their videos. Students with less experience of the platform in English are also given a suggestion list with examples of English language YouTubers, their topics, and a link to their channel to help students choose a video. The teacher again collects student-sourced vocabulary during this process, which class members can use to increase the authenticity of the their videos.

Students begin to plan their videos and put the techniques they have learned into practice. Learners are given the project sheet shown in Figure 7 and two or three lessons to plan their videos regarding content, language, and scheduling. The filming and editing of the video, though, are conducted over the winter vacation as a homework task.

Students use Apple iMovie to create and edit their videos, as it is relatively straightforward to use and freely available on their iPads. The students had used this application before, but the first time they were introduced to the software, learners were given a brief written guide and a short demonstration. Any suitable video application could be used, but the instructions are really invaluable in

helping the lessons proceed smoothly. Students upload their videos to YouTube for a realistic experience, but the important point when doing this is to make sure videos are posted as "unlisted" so that only users given a link can view the work. All videos are removed after the project has been completed. In the final lesson, the class watches the videos together. To make the lesson interactive and give students more input and output opportunities, learners use the "comment" function of YouTube to add feedback to each video. Finally, the learners complete a brief review of the unit (Appendix) to help students reflect on their performance and future learning while also giving feedback for the teacher to refine the materials for the next class.

Figure 5. Example worksheet to analyse and discuss key features of successful YouTubers

What makes a good YouTube video?

Summary

1. Clear
2. Easy to understand
3. Good Volume - check
4. Casual talk like talking with friends
5. Good Reaction / Expressions
6. Good Comments / contents
7. Effective sound
8. Good Editing
9. Talking skill (original phrases, humour, variety)
10. Original features
11. Good plan for contents of movie
12. Appropriate music
13. Good images / video clips
14. Impact
15. Subtitles / titles (optional) **only important points**

Figure 6. Good YouTube videos summary guide

You are going to make a **4 minute** YouTube video. Make the video about a
subject you are interested in, for example:

• Your hobby • travel • work • student life • video games • shopping • hair / make-up / nails • music / music /playlist • food / restaurants	Or you could make a • news story • fiction story (role play) • talk about trends • video diary • Interview • or anything you like – just make it interesting!

Tasks

1. Plan your video – think of ideas, plan the location, order of events, roles, what
   tools, techniques or people you will use - to express your message. **Watch some
   youTube videos (English or Japanese)** on the subject you like and check their
   styles.
2. Write a script / plan
3. Learn your script
4. Practice your video
5. Shoot your video
6. Reshoot your video (or sections) if it is not good enough
7. Edit your video
8. Upload your video (Upload / Unlisted / share with me)

Deadline: XXXXXXXXX

Figure 7. Project sheet for the YouTube video

Conclusion

These methods have been successful in the setting described in the paper. Students reported in their reflections how they enjoyed many aspects of the lessons, especially the exposure to vocabulary and communication techniques not encountered before this unit. This was supported by classroom observations where learners became increasingly comfortable and fluid in their use of casual and colloquial language, not only in their YouTube videos but also in subsequent discussions and conversational interactions.

The positive results observed in this group of students do not necessarily mean the methods are appropriate for all classes or learners. The unit is presented in the hope that it can encourage more educators to integrate social media and its communication styles into their classrooms in implementations tailored to their own unique environments. The materials were continually refined to arrive at this stage. An obvious area for development would be to migrate students onto the actual Twitter platform after their experience of the Class Twitter shared document. This expansion has the potential to link up classes and even a network of universities through student-generated social media posts relevant to learners' interests. The difficulty, though, is creating this in a manner that allows the students to navigate the online world safely while focusing clearly on their language development goals.

Throughout this unit, students responded enthusiastically to assignments in which they could choose much of the input and output content. This zeal was demonstrated by the range of topics students chose and the attention to detail in their work. In terms of language development, the analysis and imitation of social media communications gave learners fragments of natural language that added an authenticity to their speech. By the end of the course, learners demonstrated remarkable communicative dexterity, a skill vital for negotiating meaning in online and offline situations. Moreover, students came to appreciate how social media can be an appropriate and effective means for real language improvement through enjoyable autonomous learning. Therefore, the implementation of this social media unit has been encouraging, offering benefits that can offset the gaps in traditional methods. Consequently, the experience was

in accord with the evidence presented in the introduction of this paper; these kinds of technologies have a central role to play in supporting active, student-focused language learning.

References

Beirne, D. (2021). Teaching social media language. *Osaka JALT Journal*, *8*(1), 37–46. http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static /f/462558/28492633/1641174931113/Osaka+JALT+Journal+2021+-+Beirne.pdf?token=4vpXGIpi2ZO631M8mhFXdzTy55Y%3D

Chartrand, R. (2012). Social networking for language learners: Creating meaningful output with Web 2.0 tools. *Knowledge Management & E-Learning: An International Journal*, *4*(1), 97–101. https://doi.org/10.34105/j.kmel.2012.04.009

Chawinga, W. D. (2017). Taking social media to a university classroom: Teaching and learning using Twitter and blogs. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *14*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-017-0041-6

Derewianka, B. (2008). Venturing beyond YouTube. Learning the language of appraisal. *TESOL in Context*, *18*(2), 42–72. https://search.informit.org/doi/epdf/10.3316/ielapa.760423910575770

Dzvapatsva, G., Mitrovic, Z., & Dietrich, A. (2014). Use of social media platforms for improving academic performance at Further Education and Training colleges. *SA Journal of Information Management*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v16i1.604

Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). (2009). *Higher education in a Web 2.0 world: Report of an independent Committee of Inquiry into the impact on higher education of students' widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies*. http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/176742

Jones, R., & Hafner, C. A. (2012). *Understanding digital literacies: A practical introduction*. Routledge.

Ghasemi, B., Hashemi, M., & Bardine, S. H. (2011). Utube and language learning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *28*, 63–67. https://doi.

org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.013

HigtonBros. (2014, June 2). *What's on your mind?*[Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxVZYiJKl1Y

Jarvis, H. (2004). Investigating classroom applications of computers on EFL courses at higher education institutions in the UK. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *3*(2). 111–137. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2003.08.002

Jones, A. (2015). How Twitter saved my literature class: A case study with discussion. In C. Wankel, M. Marovich, K. Miller, & J. Stanaityte (Eds.), *Teaching arts and science with the new social media* (pp. 91–105). Emerald Group Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2044-9968(2011)0000003008

Litasscatalogue. (2016, May 18). *Time-lapse shows model's radical Photoshop transformation* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_gHkwjNicc

Shortis, T. (2007). Gr8 Txtpectations: The creativity of text spelling. *English Drama & Media Journal*, *8*, 21–26. http://nl.ijs.si/janes/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/shortis07.pdf

Statista. (2021, October 6). *Share of people aged 17 to 19 years old who use social media platforms in Japan as of June 2020*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1154797/japan-penetration-rate-of-social-media-among-young-people/

Statista. (2022, April 20). *Average time people aged 10 to 17 years old spent on using the internet per weekday in Japan from fiscal year 2014 to 2021*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/944415/japan-duration-internet-usage-youth/

The Late Late Show. (2017, June 9). *David Beckham Had a Big Influence on Brooklyn's First Tattoo*[Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruGhRg4yT3M

Author Bio

Denver Beirne *is a Lecturer at Asia University, Tokyo. His interests include metaphor, corpus linguistics, and materials development focusing on CALL and CLIL. beirner@yahoo.com*

Appendix

Student reflection on the social media unit

Social Media Reflection

How was the experience of making your YouTube video?

Did you have enough knowledge and understanding to make your video?

What would you do differently if you had to make another YouTube video?

What was the most enjoyable part of this unit?

What was the most challenging part of this unit?

Are there any valuable things you learned during this unit?

How will you incorporate the knowledge you learned into your English learning?

How could you have improved your studying and performance in this unit?