

Chapter 15

Analysing WhatsApp and Instagram as Blended Learning Tools

Alberto Andujar

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8865-9509>

University of Almeria, Spain

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores, from a theoretical point of view, the literature investigating the use of WhatsApp and Instagram applications to foster language learning as well as the outcomes of the studies carried out in these two fields. The possibilities of these two apps to develop blended learning environments are also regarded. The theoretical frameworks in the existing literature for the possible implementation of these social networking tools in classroom contexts are considered. Findings indicate a growing number of studies making use of the WhatsApp application to develop either blended learning models or online tasks in foreign language courses while the research exploring the use of Instagram for language development remains very scarce.

INTRODUCTION

The constant growth of a globalized education model in which information and communication technology (ICT) becomes a fundamental element to carry out ubiquitous teaching and learning processes (Altbach, 2004) has involved changes at all levels. Specifically, at a university level, the need to catch up with the latest educational tools has transformed the learning environment to a context in which technology and in-class tuition coexist. This situation, which is relatively new, has led to the exploration of blended learning processes in which in-class tuition is combined with an online environment in which between 20% to 79% of course contents are delivered online (Arbaugh, 2014). Blended learning becomes a flexible and autonomous environment (Im & Kim, 2015) which need to be investigated from different points of view – technological, educational, and practical among others – in order to develop the most appropriate learning environments to fulfill students' needs. In this context, most of the present literature exploring Computer-

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assisted Language Learning (CALL) or Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) involves a certain degree of blended learning. The new online environments, in which students normally face a high cognitive load due to their exposure to discourse in a foreign language, have become a support during language learning, in many cases facilitating the learning process (Ball and Lindsay, 2013). Positive effects of this learning model have been found in previous literature (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; López-Pérez, Pérez-López & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011; Law, Geng, & Li, 2019) and different factors such as higher participation or motivation levels and an increase in students' autonomy have been emphasized.

By contrast, it also seems necessary to understand the impact of certain tools in the development of blended learning models and how students' previous knowledge of that tool, the level of engagement generated or its accessibility may entail different outcomes during the development of blended learning processes. In this sense, this chapter will explore from a theoretical perspective, the potential of two of the most common social networking platforms among students, Instagram and WhatsApp. The reason behind this choice has to do with several theoretical and practical considerations. First, the outstanding number of users in each of the applications as of August 2019, WhatsApp with approximately 1.5 billion monthly active users and 1 billion daily active users, and Instagram with 1 billion monthly active users and 600 million daily active users (Stout, 2019). Second, theoretical considerations acknowledged by experts in the field such as Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2007) who stated that student do not use technology they may consider intrusive or those technological tools and software which may require a long time to master. Thus, from a teacher perspective, it seems necessary to explore how the most used social networking platforms can be used to develop blended learning models and how the existing literature into the two applications can shape teacher practices and course design.

The third reason behind this choice is the growing amount of literature dealing with language learning and social networking platforms. These online environments, normally referred as 2.0 platforms and used for socializing, sharing information or meeting (Boyd, 2014), are visited by a great number of young people (Counts & Fisher, 2010; Dunn, 2013). Interestingly, although the majority of social media platforms have a web version, most of them are accessed from mobile devices (Global Digital Statistics, 2019). This fact needs to be taken into consideration by teachers and institutions willing to implement blended learning models through social networks. Apart from the fact that studies into language learning highlighted differences in students' behavior in computer and mobile environments (e.g. Andujar & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2019), the accessibility and ubiquity of mobile devices becomes a fundamental aspect to guarantee students' engagement during the learning process.

In this context, the chapter aims to shed light on the possibilities of WhatsApp and Instagram to develop blended learning models in which these two social networking platforms can foster language learning development. In order to tackle this aim, the existing literature in each of the two platforms together with researchers' insights for an appropriate implementation of these applications in language learning contexts will be explored.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Social networks have been used in classroom environments since their appearance and for different learning purposes (Mao, 2014). From an early use of Wikis and Blogs (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013) to the use of more widespread social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Wechat or WhatsApp among others, social networks have allowed students to interact through new different ways of communica-

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