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Exploration of Teachers' and Students' Attitude towards the Integration of Virtual Social Networks (VSN) in Language Learning Classroom Tasks

Sorhaila Latip-Yusoph

Associate Professor, Mindanao State University, Marawi City, Philippines

Abstract:

This paper explores on the attitudes of teachers and students on the integration of virtual social networks in language learning classroom tasks especially on the aspects of enhancing learning skills such as writing, reading, speaking and listening. Results show the outcomes from this simple research confirming the vast majority of the hypotheses: that all of the respondents access different virtual social networks; that languages of multilingual individuals will appear in all VSN features; that teachers and students have varied motivations as they access their VSNs; that teachers and students have varied attitudes in the capabilities of VSN in assisting their language learning; and that teachers and students have varied feelings towards the possible integration of VSN in their classroom tasks. Further, evidences on respondents' multilingual use of languages in their VSNs are shown and varied agreements on the abilities of VSNs in language learning are described using mean scores and standard deviations. All reflective opinions on the integration of VSN tools in classroom tasks are qualitatively collected. Evidences show how VSNs can be effective tools in language learning and the inclusion of listening and speaking features can be important avenues for future researches.

Keywords: Virtual social networks, multilingual, language learning

1. Introduction

The global network known as the World Wide Web is the new virtual space where people with very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds converge (Kralisch and Mandl, 2006). Flow of information is becoming its strength especially with the advent of Virtual Social Networks (VSN) where according to Panteli (2009), VSN are spaces where multiple media such as audio, video, text, blogging and taggable photos converge and interact in multiple and volatile ways. This potentiality in VSN is giving a larger arena for researchers to explore and evaluate existing outlooks that teachers and students may have in learning languages through these virtual spaces. The question is raised: What are the attitudes of teachers and students towards the integration of VSN in their language learning classroom? Specifically, this paper shall explore on how different are the access and perception of teachers and students in learning languages via virtual social networks.

Emphasis of this study looks into four aspects: access and motivations, language use on VSN, and attitude towards the language learning through VSN and the possible integration to classroom tasks. This exploration of the possible integration is inspired much by recent research into how second-language acquisition (SLA) has moved away from traditional, behaviourist theories to focus on the importance of input and interaction in the target language, the idea being that interaction and immersion simulate the environment in which native languages are learnt (Gupta, 2010). Further, in some countries where learning a second language is important, this technological intervention can be supportive in students learning.

In the Philippines' capital alone, 70% of the school children and university students have access to computers for so many reasons and motivations (Bongco & Oñate, 2010). Further, in the past three years, use of virtual social networks like Facebook has confirmed the country to be among the top users and members (CheckFacebook.com, 2010). Interestingly, users of such network are multilingual individuals. The Philippines according to Ethnologue, there are 175 living minority languages aside from the compulsory language requirements in the country's bilingual policy where English and Filipino are the required language courses. In some parts of the country like the southern Philippines, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, there is an additional Arabic language course across curriculums from pre-school to secondary school level (DepEdARMM, 1990 Resolution). Having this enormous responsibility for teachers and learners to design and access learning materials, technological advancement offers huge amount of opportunity for teachers and learners alike.

With these factors in mind, this exploration study is specifically targeting the attitudes of the teachers and students from the southern Philippines who have access to virtual social networks. Their language use and motivations in learning a language via virtual social networks are to be presented in detail in the different parts of this research paper. However, limited findings from this quantitative research design do not claim any generalisation of the entire scenario in the country.

Specifically, this research aims at answering the following questions:

- i. How do teachers and students access their virtual social networks?
- ii. What are the language/s they use in the virtual social networks?
- iii. What are their motivations towards the use of VSN?
- iv. How aware are they of the features of VSN that can assist language learning?
- v. What are their feelings towards the possible integration of VSN in their classroom tasks?

These above questions are answered and interpreted in the results and discussion sections below.

2. Review of Related Literature

This section reviews the literatures supplementing the areas of interest in this study. The areas covered are the theoretical perspectives and identified researches on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (known as CALL) and the viewpoints on the relationship of Language learners and the Web. Both concepts are discussed below according to their relationships to the context of exploring teachers' and students' attitude towards the Integration of Virtual Social Networks (VSN) in Language Learning Classroom Tasks.

As introduced in the first part of this essay, VSNs are part of the internet's ways of making individuals interact in the cyberspace using texts and multiple media (Panteli, 2009). This concept of web interaction has been noted by Blattner and Fiori (2009) to be a powerful tool for enhancing learners' opportunities for 'group' interactions from various parts of the world using the target languages needed in the classrooms. Advantageously, this supports the importance of VSNs to any classroom task.

Interestingly, this VSN tool falls under the concept of CALL. Since CALL has been there for several decades now (Egbert, Chao and Hanson-Smith, 1999), this and has continued to increase contribution to the field of language learning and computer mediated communication (Erben, Ban & Castaneda, 2009). The theoretical perspective of CALL started in Levy's book on *CALL: context and conceptualisation* (1997, p. 1) where he stated that "computer-assisted language learning is defined as the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning." He argued in his book that the concept of CALL has embraced all ICT applications and approaches dating back to the 1950's (Levy, 1997). CALL tools have attracted many researchers in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and linguistics as manifested in the recent works of Schmid and Thomas (2010), Shield & Kukulka-Hulme (2008), and Lamy&Hampel (2007), where they all agreed to the effectiveness of CALL in assisting students' language learning in the classroom. It can therefore be argued that today's CALL tools, such as social networking, are relevant extension of the teaching and learning strategies that CALL has offered.

Further, among the recent researches made on the effectiveness of CALL to the language learning skills such as speaking and pronunciation, Tanner and Landon (2009) showed how effective is the use of computers in testing and treating learner's use of pauses, stress, intonation and overall comprehensibility. This is supported by Cordier (2009) where he tested 30 participants using Speech recognition software to evaluate the validity of student's performance and perceptions. This particular study, though very limited in scope, can be an interesting beginning for the exploration of CALL's capability in enhancing speaking skills of language learners. Following the foregoing arguments, the present study is inspired by the investigation of how these CALL tools can be of significance to the attitude of the learners and teachers in the Philippines.

2.1. The Learners and the Web

CALL's capability at present has been increasing because of learners' access of the Web afforded by most educational systems in the world as they employ the Web into their curricula (Kurubacak, 2002). In the research of Blattner and Fiori (2009) mentioned above, they admitted that "little is known about how online social networks such as Facebook can develop a sense of community in language classrooms or how they can impact the development of socio-pragmatic competence in language learners" (Blattner and Fiori, 2009, p.1). This recent study on online social networking is part of the new concept of Web 2.0 which is defined by Anderson (2007) as the online applications on the web that assists social interactions online where anyone can communicate ideas by posting, editing and receiving feedback via networks. This supports this study's assumption that VSN can afford learners the chance to socially interact (Vygotsky, 1978) with native speakers, other students and their teachers. This is supported by Egbert and his colleagues' argument (1999 and as cited in Padilla, 2000) that through the web, learners have opportunities to interact as they negotiate meaning; use target language with authentic audience as they involve in real life tasks; encourage learners to produce outputs in their target language with sufficient feedback; guided and attended to by teachers in their learning process with an ideal atmosphere; and have supported autonomy on production (Padilla, 2000). Therefore, the Web has offered students a space in which they can wander freely as well as a source of material for their classroom needs (Felix, 1999), and shall be further explored for classroom use instead of a perceived threat towards teaching efficiency, as viewed by some teachers in the Philippines.

As noted above in this essay, these two concepts, CALL and the Web's relationship with the learners have caught attention from many researchers mentioned above and are continuously studied in most ELT researches including this exploratory study on teachers' and students' attitude towards the integration of VSN in classrooms in the Philippines. In conclusion, this study offers many realizations and opportunities that can put relevance to the existence and access of Filipino students to the World Wide Web especially the recent virtual social networking tool.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

From the introduction to the reviews, the importance of social interaction and collaboration in language learning (Vygotsky 1978) has been given much of a focus in this study. Learners practise in a social context (with teachers, native speakers, other students), and through that interaction, knowledge gradually becomes embedded in the learner's internalized mental resources (Swain 2000, cited in Little 2007).

Using this framework, a useful list of hypotheses taken from the research questions are provided below:

- i. Hypothesis 1: that all of the respondents access different virtual social networks;
- ii. Hypothesis 2: that languages of multilingual individuals will appear in all VSN features;
- iii. Hypothesis 3: that teachers and students have varied motivations as they access their VSNs;
- iv. Hypothesis 4: that teachers and students have varied attitudes in the capabilities of VSN in assisting their language learning;
- v. Hypothesis 5: that teachers and students have varied feelings towards the possible integration of VSN in their classroom tasks.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data

This study is based on an online data collected primarily through E-survey pro website composed of multiple response questions, single answer questions and open ended questions (see appendices). In order to assure effective data collection from students and teachers, the website link of the questionnaire is reposted via VSN websites such as Facebook and email list service of the schools in where the researcher is affiliated. Within two-weeks of data gathering, the questionnaire reached 80 valid respondents (35 teachers and 45 students).

The questionnaire is divided into three integrated parts, the respondents' use of the virtual social networks, their attitude towards the use, and their opinions towards the integration of VSNs in classroom tasks.

Information about their frequency of use and languages used in the access in the VSN are equally relevant as part of the data needed to identify the languages that the respondents are capable of using and incorporating.

4.2. Limitations

The major drawbacks of the method of data collection are limited to teachers and students classification of responses only. The age and location of the respondents were not provided in order to control the variables needed for the comparison of perspectives.

Further, this study is focused on the respondents who have access to internet. In similar manner, the data about the languages learned and used are generally addressed without emphasis on each access.

Finally, since this study was conducted within the context of the multilingual learners of Philippines, the researcher limited the respondents to those who have more than two languages used.

4.3. Measures

In order to determine the attitude of the respondents towards their use of VSNs as well as their language learning behaviour, the researcher used a 7-point scale covering the respondents' attitudes towards language learning via their VSNs. Further, their opinions are solicited using an open ended question.

The data collected was subjected to simple descriptive measures using frequency distribution and One-way ANOVA. This analysis on variance is used for purposed of comparing the means of independent variables such as students' and teachers' responses to each question.

Lastly, to ethically collect the data, the questionnaire included a section where respondents have the option to participate or not in the study. The study's significance towards improving language learning in classrooms was explained in the cover letter of the questionnaire.

5. Results/ Data and analyses

5.1. Access to Virtual Social Networks

In the first section of the data gathering, the respondents were asked about their access and frequency of use of the VSNs. Tables below show their VSNs, features accessed in the VSNs, frequency of access, and the duration of access spent.

Table 1 depicts the virtual social networks currently used by the respondents. Responses here may be more than one choice. Each respondent can choose as many networks as possible.

VSN Used	No. of Respondents
Facebook	80
YouTube	56
Friendster	37
Twitter	32
MySpace	11
Flicker	8
Second Life	0
Others	16

Table 1: VSNs Used by the Respondents

The numbers show that all of the respondents are able to use at least one VSN. From the list, Facebook has been the top VSN used.

After knowing the VSNs accessed, respondents were asked to choose which of the features available in each VSN do they use. In Table 2, respondents chose at least one of the features.

VSN Feature	No. of Respondents
Posts	73
Links (Music/ Video)	56
Photo Upload/ Download	66
Photo Comments	73
Blogging/ Writing Notes	45
Chat	71
Virtual Groups	39
Others	4

Table 2: VSN Features Used

Table 2 shows that VSN features are used by the respondents. Varied numbers show that some features are not used. Interestingly, Tables 3 and 4 show the frequency of use and duration spent in the last access. The data below marked the ability of the respondents to use any of the features above.

Frequency of Access	No. of Respondents	Percentage
More than twice a day	19	23.75
Every day	29	36.25
Twice a week	17	21.25
Once a week	6	7.50
Once a month	2	2.50
Others	7	8.75

Table 3: Frequency of Access to VSNs

Duration	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Less than 30 minutes	5	6.25
Almost an hour	10	12.50
More than an hour	23	28.75
As long as I am given the time	39	48.75
Others	3	3.75

Table 4: Duration of the Last Access

From the numbers and percentages above in Tables 3 and 4, the majority of the respondents frequently visit their VSN as regularly as possible with the maximum number of time available for each respondent.

5.2. Languages Used in VSNs

In the second section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to describe the languages used in each access. As a summary, Figure 1 and Table 5 below show the languages used in each access with their corresponding number of responses.

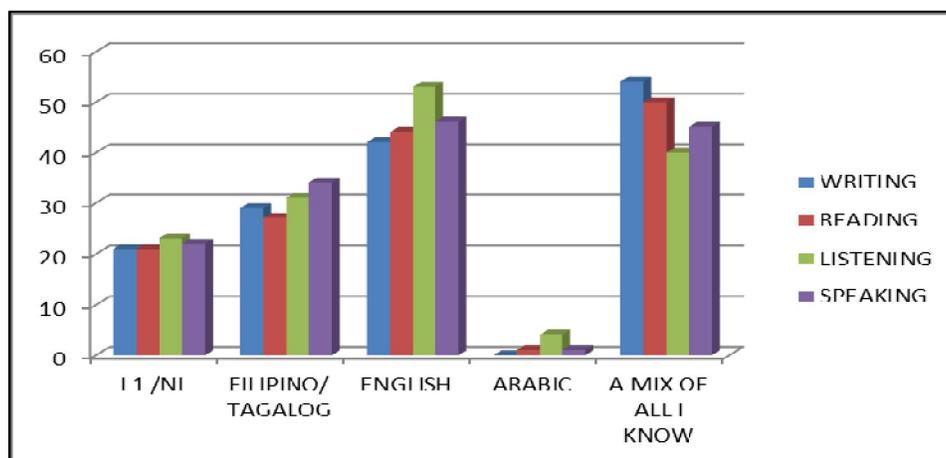


Figure 1: Summary of Languages Used

LANGUAGE	WRITING	READING	LISTENING	SPEAKING
L1 /NL	21	21	23	22
FILIPINO/ TAGALOG	29	27	31	34
ENGLISH	42	44	53	46
ARABIC	0	1	4	1
A MIX of Languages	54	50	40	45

Table 5: Summary of Languages Used

From Figure 1 and Table 5, the greater number of respondents claimed that in accessing their VSNs, as they are writing, reading, speaking and listening, they frequently used a mix of all the languages they know. Another interesting number is the use of English language which comes higher in the listening activities in their VSNs.

5.3. Attitudes towards Use of VSN

Table 6 shows the attitudes of the respondents according to their use of the VSNs. Items 9 to 15 of the questionnaire addressed their agreement to the question "What do you think about your use of virtual social networks?" in terms of the following:

Item 9. I enjoy using virtual social networks (VSNs) like Facebook, Friendster and YouTube.

Item 10. In using VSNs, I develop my computer and internet skills.

Item 11. In using VSNs, I communicate with friends and family.

Item 12. In my VSNs, I post and shout out my emotions.

Item 13. In my VSNs, I upload photos and videos for my friends to see.

Item 14. In my VSNs, I read articles from different links.

Item 15. In my VSNs, I listen to podcasts.

Item/ Respondents	No. of Respondents	Mean response	Std. Deviation
Quest9	Teachers	35	6.4857
	Students	45	6.3111
Quest10	Teachers	35	6.5143
	Students	45	6.1778
Quest11	Teachers	35	6.6857
	Students	45	6.4889
Quest12	Teachers	35	5.8286
	Students	45	5.6889
Quest13	Teachers	35	6.0571
	Students	45	5.8667
Quest14	Teachers	35	6.3143
	Students	45	6.0444
Quest15	Teachers	35	4.9714
	Students	45	5.0222

Table 6: Responses to Items 9-15

From the mean scores above, almost all items were relatively closer to the highest score of 7 which means that respondents strongly agree to the use of VSN in items 9-14. However, the mean score in Item number 15 where listening to podcasts appeared to have the lowest mean especially from the perspective of teachers. This implies lower access to podcasts via VSN. Lower standard deviation on all items shows high level of consensus among respondents (see appendices for graphical presentations).

5.4. Language Learning through VSNs

From the attitude towards access, the respondents attitudes towards language learning through VSNs, were also measured according to the 7 point scale where 7 means strongly agree. Figures 7, 8 and 9 below show their mean responses in terms of the engagement, production and environment factors in learning via the VSNs.

For Figure 2, the items addressed were the respondents engagement in VSN as they learn a language. The following were the items asked in the questionnaire:

Item 16. VSNs help me learn another language by interacting with real people through Chat rooms, posts, comments, etc.

Item 17. VSNs help me learn a language by engaging myself with writing tasks such as blogging or posting notes.

Item 18. VSNs help me learn a language because I listen to speakers from downloaded podcasts.

Item 19. VSNs help me learn a language by reading articles linked online like news articles and teachers' notes.

Figure 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of responses as reflected with its bar chart.

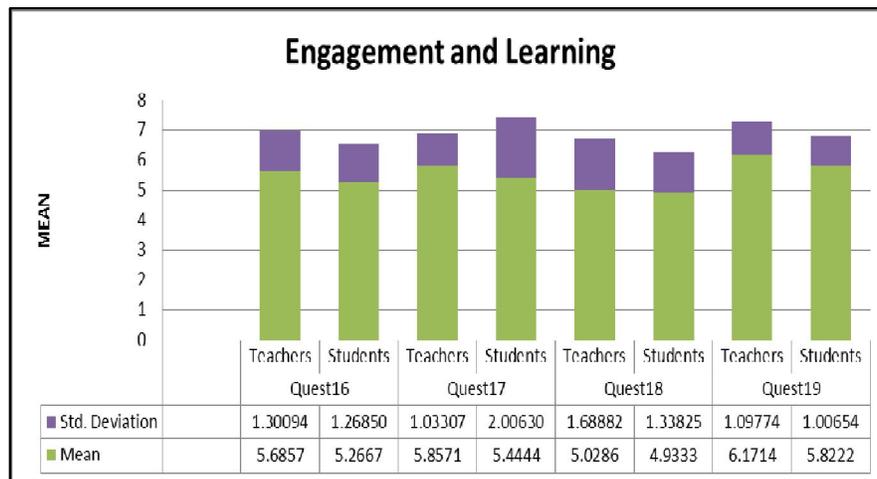


Figure 2: Engagement and Learning

The mean scores reflect the agreement scales among teachers and students. Interestingly, teachers appear to have higher agreement towards engagement and learning than that of the students. However, in item 17, the standard deviation of 2.00 reflects lower consensus among students in agreeing at the influence of blogging to writing development. Further, in item 18, students have a lower mean score of 4.93 on the influence of podcasts to listening development (see appendices for graphical presentations).

For Figure 3, the items addressed were the productions that respondents may be capable of producing as they use their VSNs. The following were the items asked in the questionnaire:

- Item 20. In my VSNs, I write notes to improve my writing skills.
- Item 21. ...I read articles or notes to improve my reading skills.
- Item 22. ...I learn vocabulary in all the languages I am interested in.
- Item 23. ... I monitor my grammar in whatever language I use.
- Item 24. ... I create audio podcasts to improve my speaking skills.
- Item 25. ... audio podcasts help me improve my listening skills.

Figure 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of responses as reflected with its bar chart.

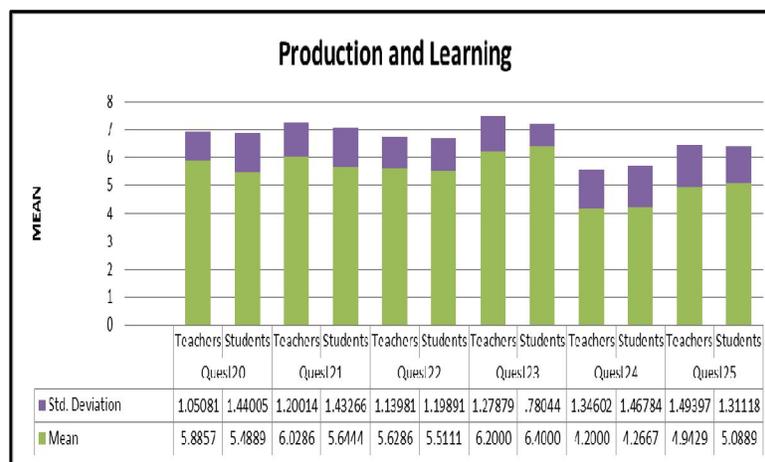


Figure 3: Production and learning

The mean scores reflect the agreement scales among teachers and students. Interestingly, teachers and students' attitude vary in each item. On items 20, 21 and 22 (writing using notes on VSNs, reading articles, and vocabulary building) reflected higher mean scores among teachers than students. While items 23, 24 and 25, students' mean score for agreeing towards grammar and podcasting appeared to be higher than teachers' mean score. Lower standard deviation means higher consensus among respondents. However, in item 24 and 25, lower mean scores of 4.2, 4.26 and 4.29 reflect lower interest on production of language learning activities using podcasting via VSNs (see appendices for graphical presentations).

Figure 4 addressed the agreement level of respondents to the significance of environment in language learning via VSNs. The following are the items included in the questionnaire:

- Item 26. In VSNs, I have immediate feedback from teachers and peers on my language use.
- Item 27. VSNs give me an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level.
- Item 28. In VSNs , I learn from doing my tasks on my own.

Figure 4 shows the mean and standard deviation of responses as reflected with its bar chart.

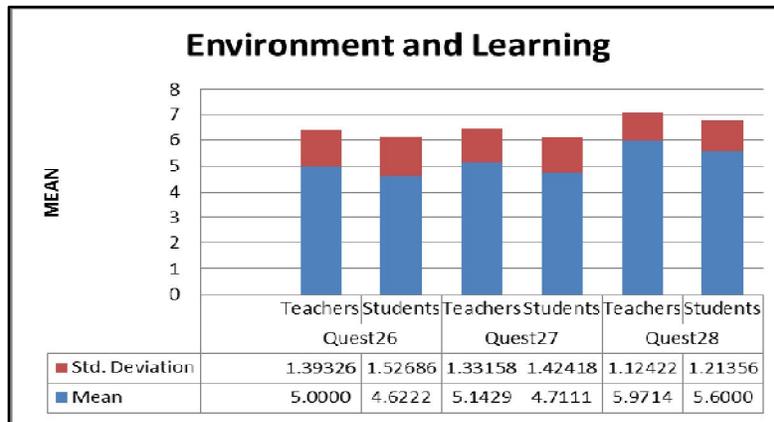


Figure 4: Environment and learning

The mean scores reflect the agreement scales among teachers and students. Interestingly, teachers’ level of agreement towards each item is higher than the students’ agreement mean score. The standard deviation reflects higher consensus among the respondents (see appendices for graphical presentations).

5.5. Integration of VSN in Language Learning Tasks

The last part of the questionnaire is an open-ended question that was designed to allow teachers and students to qualitatively describe their opinions towards the integration of VSN in language learning. Interestingly, the commonly appearing responses are listed in Table 7 and 8 for teachers and students’ responses, respectively.

Yes, I feel very fulfilled to know that my students are able to improve their four macro skills namely: speaking, writing, listening, and reading through virtual social network.
Yes and I find them interesting, current, and relevant to what my students need in order to fully immerse themselves in the language tasks - interactive communication.
Yes, exposing the students to vsn enhances their language and technological skills.
No, I don't use VSNs in my classroom tasks for learning a language because in the first place, we don't have an Internet connection in our school.
As of the moment, No. Maybe it will be very interesting if I use VSNs in my class because some can relate while others may be amazed if they find out what the VSNs will do for us.
I don't actually use VSNs for language teaching per se, I only use it for announcements or for giving reminders and instructions to my students. When I teach writing classes, though, I'd like to use blogging to develop my students' writing skills because I believe that it will help improve their skills.
NO. I would prefer to refer them credible websites, and nothing compares to books and published cd's or dvd's.
I use VSN in the classroom for my English classes. I think it is a very useful tool since our students are so much engaged in electronic media that if homework or assignments are posted online, they feel it as something exciting to do.

Table 7: List of Common Responses among Teachers

VSN our work much easier.
Through VSN we will be able to compete or interact with the other countries.
Use of VSN will be exciting and we will learn more.
It helps us get information from our teachers such as assignments, tasks, and other requirements.
Some teachers don't use it.
Sometime I'm nervous but I'm enjoying it.
VSN is fun, interesting and challenging.
Of course I'd be very happy about it. I'd think its super cool. It would be easier for me to learn since I'm using my Laptop and it would be a lot of fun!
VSN would give us another way of learning about language.
I feel that it's great because there, I can think freely without the impulse of anxiety of committing mistakes, thus generating the best ideas I need
I somehow hate it because not all my classmates have computer and internet access at home.

Table 8: List of Common Responses among Students

6. Discussion, Implication and Conclusion

Outcomes from this simple research confirm the vast majority of the hypotheses. Thus, the integration of virtual social networks in the language learning classroom has earned a significant attention from both teachers and students.

In our data, a significant disagreement and low consensus of responses appeared in the use and production of podcasts. Both teachers and students have not explored the capabilities of this VSN feature for the enhancement of listening and speaking skills development. In their languages used, a remarkable outcome appeared in the mix of languages they know; this may be an implication of how multilingualism can be evident in social networking sites.

In the opinions on the integration, most of the positive remarks gave emphasis on the effectiveness of VSN in language classrooms. However, because of lower internet access to some, students feel hesitant on its use. Nevertheless, both teachers and students appreciate the efficiency it can cater to learners and teachers of a language.

From the data gathered, we can then provide evidences of how important is the integration of technology in language learning especially on the aspect of developing listening and speaking skills.

The role of the VSN features in enhancing the four macro skills of learners is equally significant in understanding the importance of the integration. Further, the same features can be used for enhancing multilingualism through constant social interaction. As Vygotsky (1978) puts it, social interaction can improve language learning among second language speakers.

The insight given by this study is helpful to all language teachers who would explore on the capability of VSNs in enhancing language learning in classrooms. Training of teachers in this aspect of integration calls for administrative attention from academic institutions.

7. Outlook and Recommendation

This study may be limited to its Philippine context, however, the investigation can be relevant to all academic endeavours planning to integrate VSNs in their classrooms.

For future research, a study on the implications of being multilingual individuals in language learning is a promising aspect. In order to help enhance listening and speaking skills, an intervention study on this aspect using VSN can be a relevant focus. In order to help academic institutions, this study can be referred to by teachers as a preliminary data on how technology and computer-assisted language learning can be very useful for language classrooms. Currently, the researcher continues in exploring and evaluating the features of VSNs as a tool for language learning.

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