On the Use of QQ and WeChat in Chinese Tertiary EFL Teaching

Hai-Fang ZHAO
Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China
zhao.haiyang@bigc.edu.cn

Keywords: QQ; WeChat; Chinese EFL teaching; Tertiary level.

Abstract. The rapid development of the Internet and smart phones has witnessed the increasingly visible role of social media (esp. QQ and WeChat) in Chinese higher education settings. Many instructors are looking to this new technology to enhance their teaching as well as promote active learning for their students. With a questionnaire and in-depth interviews, this study investigates the specific use of QQ and WeChat by the teachers at an ordinary Chinese college in EFL teaching. The findings revealed that both software products were frequently used for professional purposes. To be specific, they were used in four major ways: class administration, sharing learning resources, communication with colleagues or students and assessment. The majority of these teachers considered social media a useful tool for professional purposes. Based on the review of the previous studies, potential fields for better integration of social media into higher education were proposed to promote its education value in Chinese EFL teaching on tertiary level.

Introduction

Social media, a product of the incredible rise of the Internet, generally allows users to create, share and exchange data with others. More academically, it is defined as the means of interactions among people in which they communicate, collaborate and share information online in a social dialogue in a virtual community[1]. Along with the rapid development of smart phones and wi-fi, various forms of social media, esp. QQ and WeChat, has won great popularity among Chinese people. By the end of 2017, the number of netizens in China has reached 772 billion. Among them, the people who use WeChat Moments and QZone covered 87.3% and 64.6% respectively[2]. Launched in 1999 and 2011 by Shenzhen Tencent company, QQ and WeChat have become the most popular and powerful instant messaging software in China. In recent years, the ubiquity of QQ and WeChat has received increasing attention of the people in higher education settings. Based on different theories, a growing number of instructors at colleges and universities are looking to the new technologies to enhance their teaching. Therefore, with EFL teachers in an ordinary Chinese college as a case, this study aims at investigating how they integrate these two powerful forms of social media into their teaching practice.

Literature Review

The Use of Social Media in Higher Education

Faced with the excessive use of social media over the past decade, many studies were carried out from different perspectives to examine the integration of social media into higher education programs. Some explored the educational role of social media from the perspective of students, that is, how students learn with social media. Hussain surveyed 600 Pakistani college students with a questionnaire to evaluate the trend of using social media and found 90% of the students were inclined to use face-book for academic purposes. In his study, social media played a crucial role in promoting collaboration and building international Virtual Community[3]. Balakrishnan’s study investigated the effect of different learning styles on students’ intentions to use social media for learning, which showed the significant effect of Self and Performance on students’ intentions to use social media regardless of their learning styles[4]. Studies have also shown that students enjoy using online social media sites as a means of complementing and enriching their learning activities[5].
Some other studies explored how teachers use social media to facilitate teaching. Twitter, a popular microblogging social networking site outside China, is among the top two types of social media university teachers tend to use in their classrooms. For instance, as the first paper to examine empirical studies of using Twitter in teaching and learning, Tang and Hew attempted to understand whether its implementation would benefit students or not. They discovered that although Twitter was a promising educational tool for improving interactions among learners and teachers, the positive correlation between its use and learning performance couldn’t be established[6]. However, Desselle concluded that Twitter can be a useful tool to reinforce or create new learning paradigms in a health system course[7]. Chawinga also found by analyzing blogs and Twitter posts that Twitter and blogs can effectively promote the learner-centered teaching when properly used because students shared and discussed course materials, posted their course reflections and interacted among themselves and with their lecturers[8].

In China, scholars also explored the implementation of social media in higher education. With a questionnaire, Shen and Ge found more than 90% of the college students have interacted with teachers with some form of social media and have willingness and confidence to do so in the future. Among the functions of social media, the surveyed students reported that transmitting files, online chat, sharing files, group discussion and sending E-mails were considered the most beneficial to interaction during teaching. However, they also found social media was not applied to basic courses like college English teaching as much as other professional courses.[9] Other researchers also discussed how to integrate QQ and WeChat into college courses by building online learning communities and flipped classrooms[10,11].

The Use of QQ for Chinese Tertiary EFL Teaching

QQ and WeChat, the top two popular short messaging apps, are the focus of studies on the integration of social media in Chinese tertiary EFL teaching. Many teachers have exploited their use in different college EFL courses. Su and Wen suggested that Qzone be employed to assist college English writing with teachers’ guidance[12]. After analyzing QQ group’s chief functions and the features of QQ-based interaction, Dai proposes a QQ-based interactive model for after-class translation teaching. This model has been proved practical and effective after a semester-long experiment[13]. Wu provided empirical evidence on the positive effects of QQ by applying QQ group to Q &A session[14]. QQ was also applied to promote college students’ advanced language competences, such as critical literacy[15]. These studies all give promise of using QQ to facilitate EFL learning on Chinese tertiary level.

Research of WeChat for Chinese Tertiary EFL Teaching

Compared with QQ, WeChat emerged as a more popular and powerful instant messaging app in China. It is a new trend to study its integration into college English teaching and reform. In a very influential paper, Shu highlighted the importance of extending language practice beyond classrooms[16]. WeChat is most often used on smart phones, so its occurrence highly accelerates the development of Mobil Learning(MLearning) which is claimed to be a new learning revolution and the future of Chinese foreign language learning[17]. Equipped with these beliefs, many Chinese college English teachers experimented the use of WeChat in their teaching. Jiang selected WeChat public platform as a tool to "push" English articles for English majors and indicated this platform can be effectively applied to reading instruction[18]. This tool was also employed to maximize the connection between teacher’s knowledge and students’ learning construction, arouse students’ enthusiasm, encourage engagement, thereby breaking the limits of traditional classroom in terms of time and space and improving the teaching efficiency[19, 20].

These studies all proved to some extent the potentials of QQ and WeChat as effective means of MLearning to facilitate English teaching and learning in Chinese college context, but there has been a lack of research so far examining the general tendency of using the top two pieces of instant messaging software by teachers in Chinese college. Therefore, this paper tends to do this as a case study in order to give a bigger picture of their impacts on ordinary college English teachers’ work.
Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Social constructivism can be applied to teaching with social media. It claims that knowledge/learning is constructed during the interaction between people and the environment. That is, learning is conversational in nature including dialogue and shared activities[21]. The four key elements of a learning environment include situation, cooperation, conversation, meaning construction. Interactive language theory also stresses the interaction with people and context in ESL acquisition. Hussain contends that social media played a significant role in promoting collaboration and linkage to develop Virtual Community across the world[3]. Through large amounts of interaction on QQ or WeChat, Online Learning Community can be established and a sense of community is crucial for M-Learning. Based on these rationales, this current study sought to address the following questions to better understand college English teachers’ use of QQ and WeChat for teaching:

RQ1 What’s the general tendency of using QQ and WeChat for English teaching in this college?
RQ2 How do these English teachers use QQ and WeChat for professional purposes?
RQ3 How do these teachers evaluate such integration?

Method

Participants

All college English teachers (25 in total ) in a Chinese municipal college participated in the study. Their students are undergraduates and graduates from different departments. The courses they teach include college English, professional English courses (such as Printing English, Art Design English) and graduate English.

Data Collection

A mixed method approach was used to obtain the data. The first tool was an online questionnaire (conducted by an online software Questionnaire Net) consisting of 3 parts. Part I was about the general tendency of QQ and WeChat use by these teachers for teaching with focus on their preference and frequency. Part II involves questions about the specific activities they did with the software for academic-related purposes. In part III, these teachers were asked to assess the value of using the two pieces of software. The second tool was an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted with some participating teachers to supplement the questionnaire answers. During the interview, these teachers also demonstrated what they did on QQ and WeChat on PC or smart phones.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data was extracted. For the questionnaire, the online software Questionnaire Net could do the statistics by giving number of persons for each question. Bar drafts or pie drafts were also provided about the relative coverage. For the semi-structured interviews, good examples of using QQ or WeChat were obtained from their oral reports and demonstration.

Results and Discussion

General Tendency of QQ and WeChat Use for English Teaching in This College

The general tendency of software use was examined in terms of preference and frequency as shown in Table 1 below.
Table 1. General Tendency for Software Preference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Software type</th>
<th>Number of persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QQ only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeChat only</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>both</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. General Frequency for Software Use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Software type</th>
<th>Number of persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QQ higher</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeChat higher</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearly the same</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that 72% of the participants used both QQ and WeChat for academic-related purposes and 28% used only one kind. This proved the popularity of social media among college teachers and paved way for their further integration into teaching and research. Table 2 depicts that 72% of participants have their preference for social media forms, and WeChat was used 8% more frequently than QQ. The results confirmed the higher popularity WeChat now enjoys than QQ in general. From the interview, two reasons were found to account for this. First, compared with QQ, WeChat was a new fashion as a tool of instant communication combining basic functions such as voice, message, video, sharing. Besides, WeChat was used so widely for paying (online and real-store shopping, utilities, entertainment, train tickets, bikeshare, to name only a few) that it has replaced the real wallet in a sense. To many people, it has become an indispensable tool in life. QQ, however, retains its relative popularity in higher education settings because it is a more powerful tool for class administration.

Educational Use of QQ and WeChat

The specific ways in which the social media was used were depicted below.

Table 3. Ways of QQ and WeChat Use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of persons(QQ)</th>
<th>Number of persons(WeChat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assign homework</td>
<td>11(44%)</td>
<td>12(48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect and hand out homework</td>
<td>7(28%)</td>
<td>9(36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue notices</td>
<td>15(60%)</td>
<td>15(60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share course-related materials(such as PPT, exercise, etc.)</td>
<td>18(72%)</td>
<td>14(56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q&amp;A, discussion</td>
<td>11(44%)</td>
<td>12(48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exchange with students</td>
<td>9(36%)</td>
<td>17(68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer communication</td>
<td>12(48%)</td>
<td>18(72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share English learning resources</td>
<td>18(72%)</td>
<td>18(72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek and share research information and resources</td>
<td>13(52%)</td>
<td>17(68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain students’ feedback</td>
<td>11(44%)</td>
<td>12(48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5(20%)</td>
<td>3(15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: This is a multiple-choice question. Participants can choose more than one answers.)

The classification of categories above is based on the author’s own as well as colleagues’ teaching practice (obtained from pre-survey interview). Table 3 is about the educational activities the participants did with QQ and WeChat. It can be seen clearly that four categories were used by more than 50% of the participants for both QQ and WeChat: Issue notices(60%/60%), Share course-related materials(such as PPT and exercise)(72%/56%), Share English learning resources(72%/72%), Seek and share research information and resources(52%/68%). This means the two pieces of social media were used by more than a half teachers for class administration and resource seeking and sharing. Plus, more than 50% participants used WeChat on two other categories: Emotional exchange with students(68%) and Peer communication (72%), which further proved the greater popularity of WeChat in communication among social media. Three other
categories (Assign homework, Q&A and discussion, Gain students’ feedback) for both software were used by more than 44% of teachers with a slightly higher percentage for WeChat. They are also basic elements for class administration. Peer communication on QQ was used by nearly 50% of teachers.

In summary, the results revealed 4 major ways in which QQ and WeChat were used in English teaching at this college: (a) class administration, (b) sharing resources, (c) communication and (d) assessment. When comparing the two social media forms, QQ showed its strength in sharing course-related materials for its capability of large-file transfer. WeChat, on the other hand, has obvious advantage in peer and teacher-student interaction. Some teachers also confirmed in the interview that they prefer QQ for class administration because this platform has functions like BBS, assigning homework and large e-mail. Another reason for their preference is they want to separate work from life in some degree (QQ for work and WeChat for life, to be specific), which can help them respond to messages from students more promptly.

Teacher Evaluation of Integrating QQ and WeChat into Teaching and Research

Table 4 below demonstrated how the teachers evaluated the effectiveness of both apps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>QQ and WeChat (in general)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>11/44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>useful</td>
<td>11/44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>3/12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless</td>
<td>0/0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that a majority of (88% in total) these teachers assessed QQ and WeChat as useful and very useful. These results proved the positive impacts of these software applications on higher education[10,11,13] and English teaching and learning in specific[22]. With QQ and WeChat on smart phones and easy access to the Internet, traditional English classes were extended into virtual space. By MLearning, learning activities in and out of classes are made into a complete whole, which is a critical element for successful language instruction[17]. These teachers held that the educational use of the two apps could encourage more students participation in learning activities, construct learning communities and motivate teachers to improve their teaching methods. However, 12% more teachers were still uncertain about the usefulness of the two software products for teaching purposes. Interviews indicate that these teachers spent much less time on them and didn't explore them in depth. This leaves room for teacher training and development in this field.

Potential Fields for Better Integration

Based on the survey results and previous studies in this field, there are three potential fields in which both software applications may be more effectively used by Chinese college EFL teachers. First, the software can be used not only after class as a necessary extension of teaching and learning, but also in class (for example, a short vocabulary quiz, a listening practice or a quick poll). Second, teachers can take full advantage of WeChat public platform to conduct their teaching. For example, they can sign up for their personal accounts like those well-known scholars or build college English SPOC(Small Private Online Courses) to send subject-related materials, share good works or resources and promote interaction[23]. Also, micro-class videos can be posted onto social media to help students preview class contents well and prepare for flipped classes.

Conclusion

In this paper, 25 English teachers in an ordinary college in China were surveyed about their use of QQ and WeChat for professional purposes. The main findings are as follows: 1. Most teachers used
both software for academic-related purposes and used WeChat more frequently than QQ. It is encouraging to find that these teachers have realized the impacts of social media on higher education and are taking actions to accelerate their integration; 2. Both apps was used in four main ways: class administration, sharing resources, communication and assessment; 3. A majority of these teachers made very positive evaluation on the integration of social media to teaching, which suggested great potential for its further exploitation.

However, the number of subjects in this study was deemed insufficient for a thematic analysis of QQ and WeChat use in Chinese tertiary EFL settings. The questions in the survey are not comprehensive enough to cover different aspects of social media use. With a questionnaire and interviews, this current study is more descriptive in nature. Despite these limitations, the paper is believed to be able to shed some light on how Chinese college English teachers utilize the two most popular social media forms for their teaching, learning and research. It is hoped that this study will promote further research among Chinese college EFL teachers and scholars interested in using this new technology for teaching and learning purposes.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication as a Teaching Reform Project (The Application Study of QQ and WeChat in Tertiary EFL Teaching, No. 22150118003).

References


