

Social Media in the LINC Classroom: Instructors' Perceptions, Barriers and Support Necessary for Effective Integration

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Research on the integration of social media (SM) in English as a foreign (EFL)/second (ESL) language learning instruction in K-12 and higher education settings exists. However, the use of SM platforms in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program has remained under examined. To fill this gap, this study used a mixed-method design to investigate LINC instructors' perceptions about integrating SM in English language learning. The study also examined the barriers that might hinder SM integration into LINC instruction and the support these instructors need for an effective use of SM. To this end, 13 LINC instructors completed an anonymous online survey that collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Findings suggest that LINC instructors have positive perceptions about using SM to support English language learning. Yet, successful SM integration might be hindered by the instructors' lack of training, time, and support. These findings have important implications for policymakers and LINC programs administrators who might consider providing instructors with the necessary support to effectively use SM in English language instruction to better meet the needs of their diverse group of learners.

Keywords: social media, LINC, perceptions, barriers, support

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Canada has long been declared a nation of immigrants (Mulholland & Bile, 2004, p. 4). Between 290,000 and 330,000 new immigrants entered Canada in 2018, with this number predicted to grow more by 2020 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2019). Between the years 2015 and 2016, 97,717 newcomers received language training, 99% of whom received English language training (IRCC, 2017). These numbers underscore how pertinent learning English is for settlement in Canada. In fact, the projected increase in number of immigrants has brought English as Second Language learning front and centre.

For these newcomers, acquiring English is necessary for success. English language proficiency (ELP) is a critical factor determining new immigrants' educational and economic life chances in most provinces of Canada (Boyd, 1990; Derwing & Waugh, 2012; DeSilva, 1997; Pendakur & Pendakur, 1997). In the province of Alberta for example, a Canadian Language Benchmark of 5 to 8 is usually needed to get a job (Government of Alberta, n. d.). Likewise, research has shown that language is the main barrier newcomers experience in their settlement (Bartel, 2018; Cray & Currie, 2004; Derwing & Waugh, 2012; CIC, 2010; Ricento et al., 2008). Newcomers' inability to integrate socially and economically may have dire repercussions for the whole country (Duffy, 2000).

The onus has always been on newcomers to socially integrate and adapt (Bartel, 2018). Yet, crossing the "linguistic borders" (Long, 2014, p.4) can be an arduous task for new arrivals who bring in different cultural backgrounds, learning experiences, and expectations. Most newcomers also start the English language learning journey in adulthood. In 2018, most newcomers to Canada were between 25 and 39 years of age and most identified as speaking a language other than English or French (IRCC, 2019).

To support adult newcomers with language learning, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) offers the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program among many other settlement services. The objective of the LINC program is "to offer basic language training in English or French to facilitate social, cultural, economic and political integration into Canada" (CIC, 2010, para. 2). Classes are offered full and part time and are designed to accommodate the needs of adult newcomers (18 years of age and over).

Although LINC emphasizes the ability to function in society, research shows that the LINC curriculum faces many challenges and that many of LINC students' needs are not being met (Araf et al., 2018; CIC, 2010; Cray & Currie, 2004; Derwing & Munro, 2013; Ricento et al., 2008). A 2017 evaluation of the settlement program overseen by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) stated that changes should be implemented to the language training program to better meet the diverse needs across clients and language skills. Among the report recommendations is the necessity to "consider new and innovative approaches to language training for adult immigrants" (IRCC, 2017, p. 2).

Research has shown that social media (SM) environments can offer LINC students an authentic and motivating language learning experience (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Kabilan et al., 2010; Kárpáti, 2009; Wheeler, 2010). By embracing SM as instructional tools, LINC facilitators can respond to the call made by IRCC while helping students learn English. It is in this context that the current study is situated. The main argument being made in this study is that the accessibility and popularity of SM can be leveraged by LINC instructors to assist their students with the task of English language learning. Little is known, however, about whether SM is used in LINC classes and about how LINC instructors perceive such integration. It is this gap in literature that drives this research. For the purpose of this study, data was gathered from LINC instructors to answer the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of LINC instructors about the integration of SM in English language learning?
- What barriers may hinder the integration of SM in LINC instruction?
- What support is needed to prepare LINC teachers to effectively integrate SM in their LINC instruction?

Literature Review

LINC Program: The Challenges

The assumption behind the LINC program is that newcomers need no more than basic language proficiency to socio-economically integrate into life in Canada (Cray & Currie, 2004). This assumption was, however, challenged by studies that showed that ELP was directly linked to the level of immigrants' socio-economic integration, with low ELP resulting in poor access to job opportunities (Boyd, 1990; Derwing & Waugh, 2012; DeSilva, 1997; Pendakur & Pendakur, 1997; Picot & Sweetman, 2012). In today's knowledge and technology economy, only immigrants with high ELP can successfully participate in the workplace (Watt et al., 2006). These findings speak to the need for LINC to adopt new approaches to bridge this gap to facilitate newcomers' access to the changing job market.

LINC is a time-limited rather than competence-determined program (Veeman, 2004). In fact, many LINC students believe the language learning they receive through the LINC program is insufficient for them to achieve their academic and job goals (Ricento et al., 2008). This argument is substantiated by Watt and Lake (2004), who maintained that the 1200 funded hours are not aligned with research on adult rates of second language learning. Newcomers' language learning experience is time-constrained by employment, attendance, and family duties which may constitute a further barrier to learning (Beder & Medina, 2001; McShane, 2005). The need for increased instructional hours is even more germane considering the low literacy levels of new immigrants (Prince-St-Amand, 2016).

Many longitudinal studies have also revealed that LINC program did not prepare language learners to use real world language (Araf et al., 2018; Derwing & Munro, 2013; Derwing et al., 2008). Additionally, Derwing and Waugh (2012) speculated that the number of immigrants in the workplace is outpacing Canadian-born employees. Therefore, language programs have to emphasize pragmatic competence without which "immigrants . . . may experience considerable difficulties fitting in" (Derwing & Waugh, 2012, p. 26). This, in turn, may have far-reaching social outcomes in and outside the workplace. In this context, Derwing and Waugh (2012) have suggested the importance of studying the role of SM in helping with the social integration of immigrants.

These challenges urge LINC instructors to embrace new approaches to facilitate newcomers' socio-economic integration. One approach is to supplement LINC instruction by using SM platforms to make learning personalized and accessible outside the classroom. For the purpose of this study, SM is defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "a group of Internet-based applications that . . . allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). The underlying premise in this study is that the popularity, accessibility, efficiency, and ease of use of SM platforms have the potential to enhance language learning.

Social Media in Language Learning: The Merits

As literature on the usefulness of SM in LINC instruction is scarce, this section explores studies that addressed potential benefits and pitfalls of SM in EFL/ESL language learning in K-12 and higher education.

Advocates of SM integration in learning settings have argued that the education sector has to join the SM bandwagon given its potential. Nowhere are these calls stronger than in studies that have tried to uncover the role that SM plays in different language learning contexts (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Kabilan et al., 2010; McBride, 2009; Mills, 2011; Mitchell,

2012; Stevenson & Liu, 2010). In this respect, Blattner and Fiori (2009) argued that “it is imperative that second language (L2) classes plug into the network . . . to capitalize on the social and academic opportunities that high-tech learning has to offer” (p. 1). More so, SM tools constitute a stimulating learning environment beyond the classroom setting (Kárpáti, 2009; Wheeler, 2010). Lee and Ranta (2014) claimed that social networking sites provide ESL learners with the chance to interact with native speakers. Research has also indicated that interaction with the target language builds pragmatic awareness, which is a major aspect of language learning (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Prichard, 2013; Thorne, 2003). Another benefit of using SM in language learning is motivation, a “strong predictor of success in language classes” according to Gas and Selinker (2008, p. 21). The inclusion of SM as virtual safe environment can positively impact language learners’ motivation and autonomy (Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Wu & Hsu, 2011).

While the landscape is not easy to map out because of SM’s continuous growth, taken together, these studies provide evidence that integration of SM into language instruction can have substantial impacts on language learning. Lomicka and Lord (2016) asserted that “instructors that are well informed about these social sites and are able to develop pedagogically sound activities for their students are in the best position to foster linguistic and cultural development in their classes” (p. 265).

Social Media in Language Learning: The Demerits

Despite evidence about their merits, SM integration is still limited due to some setbacks (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Among the obstacles that hinder successful integration of SM in educational environments is instructors’ perceptions of SM as unreliable sources and a distraction to learning (Chen, 2008). The use of SM in instruction can also be marred by issues such as cyberbullying, sharing inappropriate content, and privacy issues (Butler, 2010; Brew et al., 2013). Furthermore, some students consider SM as unacademic tools (Ellis & Abreu-Ellis, 2014; Mitchell, 2012). SM can also discriminate against adult learners who may not be tech-savvy or who may lack the inclination to build online social networks (Nalbone et al., 2015; VanDoorn & Eklund, 2013). This is relevant to LINC adult students who may be new to the digital world and may be unaware of the importance of securing their privacy while online. However, the design of language curricula that support the integration of SM tools (Szapkiw & Szapkiw, 2011; Wheeler, 2010) and that consider conduct, privacy, and accessibility codes (Lomicka & Lord, 2016) can help outshine these detractors.

Barriers to Social Media Integration in Language Learning

Many barriers prevent educators from making the most out of the possibilities that are offered by digital tools (Brinkerhoff, 2014; Buabeng-Andoh, 2012; Chen, 2008; Ertmer, 1999; Neyland, 2011; Reid, 2014; Rogers, 2003; Tondeur et al., 2008). Ertmer (1999) distinguished between first-order and second-order barriers. According to Ertmer (1999), first-order barriers are “extrinsic” to teachers and include inadequate equipment, time, training, and support. Teachers may be discouraged from using technological tools in their instruction if technical support does not exist (Becca, 2004; Tong & Trinidad, 2005). Similarly, research has shown workload and lack of time to be the major deterrents to technology integration (Brinkerhoff, 2014; Cuban et al., 2001; Mumtaz, 2000; Neyland, 2011; Pelgrum, 2001). This is particularly critical in the LINC context where instructors are overloaded with daily planning and conducting portfolio-based assessments

(Ripley, 2012). For teachers to be able to manage the daily workload and to respond to the calls for technology integration, it is necessary to lessen their workload (Fullan, 2006).

In addition to first-order barriers, second-order barriers are “intrinsic” to teachers and include pedagogical beliefs, skills, and knowledge (Ertmer, 1999). According to Ertmer (2015) second-order barriers “are the true gatekeepers to technology integration” (p. 8). Overcoming these barriers is key to efficient technology integration. In fact, Cubans (1993) explained “it is belief system . . . that determines failure or success” (as cited in Holloway, 1998, p. 1110).

Professional development is the key to circumventing first-order and second-order barriers and improve technology integration into instruction (Brinkerhoff, 2014; Ertmer, 1999; Mueller et al., 2008). This is especially the case for using SM for pedagogical purposes as these platforms were first created for communication purposes (Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Zhao, 2003). Yet for professional development to be effective, it must address pedagogical and technological needs (Bybee & Loucks-Horsley, 2000; Ertmer, 2005; Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Reid, 2014), and it must be coordinated and sustained over time (Bybee & Loucks-Horsley, 2000; Speck, 1996).

Methodology

Research Design

As this study focused on the problem of SM integration in LINC English language learning, mixed-method design informed by the pragmatic worldview was deemed the most fitting methodology (Creswell, 2014). Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) explained that the “central premise [of mixed-method design] is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of the research problems than either approach in isolation” (p. 5). Mixed-method design increases confidence in the findings (Bryman, 2006; O’Cathain et al., 2010), improves accuracy, contributes to overall validity (McKim, 2015), and provides an accurate interpretation of data (Morse & Chung, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants in this study were LINC instructors in the province of Alberta. Recruitment materials were forwarded by Alberta Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language (ATESL) to its members after receiving permission to conduct the study from the Conjoint Faculties Review Ethics Board. After excluding three respondents because they submitted empty surveys, the number of respondents included in the study is 13. Question 3 of the survey asked participants about the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) they most commonly teach. CLB refers to the national standard used in Canada for describing, measuring and recognizing the English language proficiency of adult immigrants. Six participants reported that they teach CLB 1-3, three participants commonly teach CLB 4-5 and four participants teach CLB 6-8. Their level of comfort with the LINC curriculum ranged from very comfortable to somewhat comfortable. Seven participants use SM in their LINC classroom. Despite the small sample size, this population allows for insights into the issue investigated.

Instrument

A cross-sectional anonymous online survey questionnaire was used for the collection and analysis of both types of data. The survey instrument was used because it allows the collection of the same data from every participant and the unprejudiced representation of the population of interest (Owens, 2002). Some items in the survey were adapted from other studies (Abraham et al.,

2018; Ertmer, 1999) while others were created by the researcher. The survey was comprised of 41 items in four sections with both close-ended and open-ended questions. In addition to background information, respondents indicated their perceptions about using SM in their instruction, barriers that may hinder its use, and the support they needed to make it more effective. The survey was designed using the platform Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). Data were collected from mid-October 2018 through mid-November 2018.

Data Collection

The researcher used a concurrent nested design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time through the anonymous online survey (Creswell et al., 2003). The qualitative component was nested within the survey questionnaire. This design was based on two considerations. First, the overriding research question in the study, which was the investigation of LINC instructors' perceptions about using SM in English language learning, was answered mainly through quantitative data. Second, because of the time constraints of data collection and analysis, priority needed to be given to quantitative data reflected in the number of close-ended items. Qualitative data were used to complement those results. Greene et al. (1989) defined complementarity as "elaboration, enhancement, illustration, clarification of the results from one method with the results from another" (p. 259). Accordingly, the open-ended items in the survey extended the breadth and depth of respondents' answers to the close-ended items. Confidentiality was protected by the anonymous survey and the abstaining from collecting demographic data. Only the researcher had access to the data stored on the researcher's password protected computer.

Data Analysis

Thirty-eight out of the 41 survey items were on a 5-point Likert-type scale. A descriptive statistical analysis was applied to the data gathered through the Likert scale items after downloading them to an Excel spreadsheet. Descriptive analysis helped summarise the quantitative data to describe patterns and relationships. The qualitative data was analysed manually using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This exploratory approach allowed for new impressions to emerge rather than following predetermined interests. This design allowed the multiple views and experiences of the respondents to be heard both in their consistency and contradictions. Qualitative items were transcribed into separate Word documents. To reduce data, wording codes were used to help capture the essence of the narratives. Codes were then grouped to represent the emerging theme/patterns that helped shed light on the research questions.

Findings

The number of respondents included in the study is 13. However, out of the 13 LINC instructors who completed the survey, only eight answered the open-ended questions of the survey.

Perceptions of LINC Instructors about Using SM as English Language Learning Tools

The results of the second section of the survey are presented in Table 1. The overall mean ratings across the items that are about the benefits of SM are close or equal to 4 (Agree). In addition, the percentage of participants ($n = 13$) who strongly agreed and agreed exceeds 71% for these items. Nine participants agreed that SM as a teaching and learning tool can increase students' language learning. While only four participants felt ready to use SM as a teaching and learning tool, ten

participants expressed the desire to learn about how other language instructors are using SM in their classes ($M=4.00$, $SD= 1.47$).

	SA	A	U	D	SD	M(SD)
SM can increase students' language learning.	23.08	69.23	7.69	0.00	0.00	3.92 (1.21)
SM can make learning more interesting.	46.15	53.85	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.46 (0.50)
SM can enhance collaboration and engagement.	16.67	75.00	8.33	0.00	0.00	3.83 (1.21)
SM can give students more opportunities to practice outside the classroom.	58.33	41.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.58 (0.49)
SM can help me communicate with my students outside the classroom.	16.67	41.67	16.67	0.00	8.33	2.92 (1.75)
I believe that learning how to incorporate SM in instruction is important.	25.00	58.33	8.33	16.67	0.00	3.75 (1.36)
I want to learn about how other language instructors are using SM in their classes.	50.00	33.33	8.33	8.33	0.00	4.00 (1.47)

Table 1.

Perceptions of LINC instructors about using SM as English language learning tools

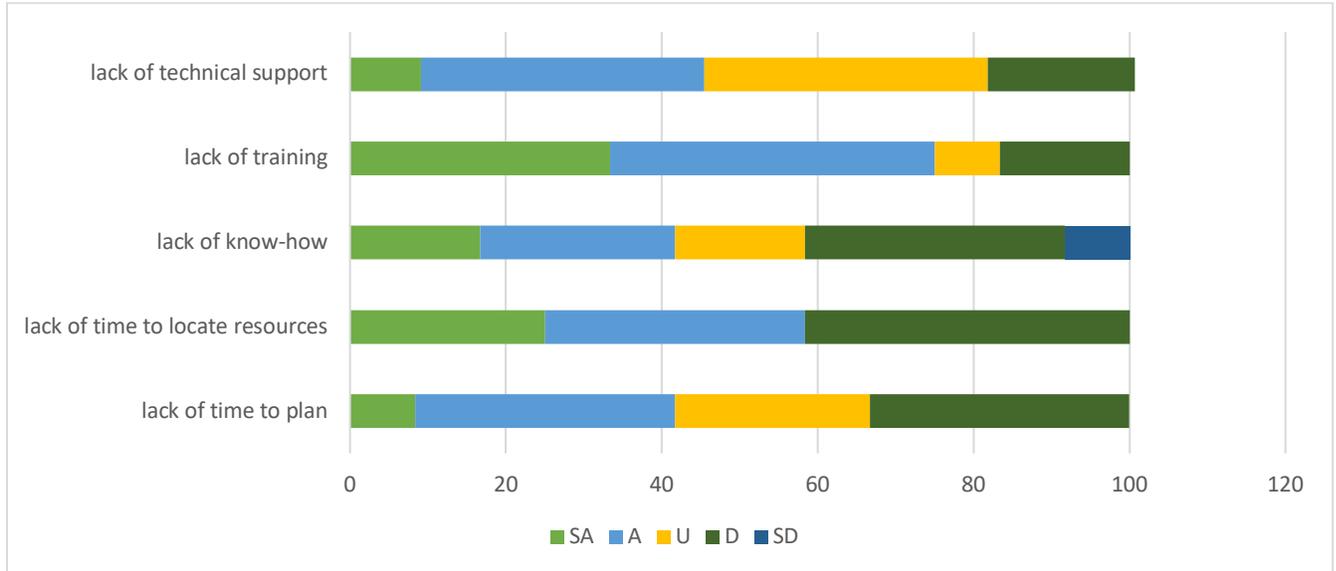
A similar theme emerged from the qualitative data. The participants ($n = 8$) indicated that SM can be an effective teaching and learning tool. SM platforms can provide an authentic environment for meaningful language practice “critical to learners' language acquisition” Respondent 13 (R 13), noted that SM can provide “a different platform” to connect students and teachers (R 7) while “building a sense of community” necessary for many LINC learners who “may be experiencing disorientation, social isolation and culture shock” (R 13). Participants also highlighted the importance of considering privacy and security issues, the need to make the right choice of platform, and the need to integrate these spaces throughout the curriculum.

Barriers to Integrating SM in English Language Instruction

Figure 1 shows the statistics for the computed items from section three of the survey. Lack of training was the major barrier identified by participants in this study with nine respondents ($n =13$) agreeing that they do not have access to training about integrating SM in instruction ($M= 3.67$, $SD= 1.49$). The second major barrier is the lack of time to plan (five participants) and locate resources on SM integration (seven participants). Five respondents ($n =13$) also indicated the lack of technical support as another challenge hampering SM use in LINC instruction.

Figure 1.

Barriers to SM integration



Note. SA= strongly agree, A= agree, U= undecided, D= disagree, SD= strongly disagree

The qualitative data provided by the respondents ($n = 8$) offered more insights into the nature of barriers. The respondents identified teacher-related barriers such as lack of “proficiency” and time, student-related barriers such as lack of interest and computer illiteracy, and institutional barriers as “LINC administration do not support teachers in the use of social media in ANY platform, let alone a platform within a teaching context” (R7).

Support Needed for an Effective Integration of SM in English Language Instruction

The results from participant surveys are organized in Table 2 based on respondents’ selection of the support they most need to effectively incorporate SM in their LINC instruction. 11 participants ($n = 13$) stated that the best support is professional development while nine respondents indicated the need for resources about the use of SM in language teaching. Technical support was identified by six participants as necessary for effective integration of SM in their instruction.

Table 2.

Support necessary for an effective SM integration

Professional development	91.67%
Technical support	50.00%
Mobile learning devices	41.67%
Community of practice	25.00%
Resources about use of SM in language teaching	75.00%
Other	8.33%

The analysis of the qualitative data to this section showed commonalities across respondents ($n = 8$) (workshops, webinars, courses and tutorials) and some differences

(“curriculum development projects” (R13), guidelines on privacy (R8) and support of LINC program curriculum).

Discussion

Using mixed-method design, this study aimed at investigating LINC instructors’ perceptions about integrating SM in their instruction, the challenges they face, and the support they need to make this integration effective. The findings from this study indicate that though LINC instructors recognize the value of SM in instruction, many barriers exist that may hamper such use.

The current study findings are consistent with previous studies. The potential of SM in making language learning more authentic and giving students more opportunities to practice outside the classroom aligns with the arguments made by Kárpáti (2009) and Wheeler (2010) that SM spaces are engaging learning environments beyond the limits of the classroom setting. This is especially relevant to LINC students for whom meaningful language practice is limited both by instructional scenarios and the insufficient number of funded instruction hours for which a LINC learner is eligible (Lee & Ranta, 2014; Saykili & Kumpete, 2014). The findings also indicate that for use of SM spaces to yield positive results, instructors should be cognizant of the issues that accompany such adoption. Likewise, literature revealed that instructors should set codes of conduct to guarantee appropriate online behavior and should use platforms created specifically for the learning experience to mitigate privacy risks (Barretta, 2014; Blyth, 2008; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Lomicka & Lord, 2016).

This study highlighted the lack of time, training, and support as the main barriers to SM integration within the LINC context. These findings closely mirror other studies that emphasized that removing these barriers is a determining factor in adopting technology in instruction (Brinkerhoff, 2014; Buabeng-Andoh, 2012; Ertmer, 1999; Porter et al., 2015; Reid, 2014; Ricento et al., 2008; Shebansky, 2018). This is pertinent in the case of LINC instructors who may be too overloaded in dealing with continuous intake, multilevel large classes, portfolio-based assessments, and students’ diverse needs to find the time to explore SM use, locate resources, and weave SM into their curriculum (Cray, 1997; Henrie, 2012). Ertmer (2005) claimed that dealing with this “laundry list” can be overwhelming for teachers. This is especially true considering that SM platforms were not initially created for classroom use and that any integration of such tools entails a creative repurposing so that tools support the meeting of instructional objectives (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Awareness about the barriers to SM integration in LINC instruction has implications for the type of support needed. Findings from this study indicate that instructors need support in the form of professional development and resources to circumvent the various barriers they face (Bauer & Kenton, 2005; Brinkerhoff, 2014; Ertmer, 1999; Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Mueller et al., 2008; Riasati et al., 2012; Shebansky, 2018; Stanford & Reeves, 2007).

These findings have implications for both the designers of the LINC curriculum and the leaders of LINC institutions. The former should consider redesigning the curriculum so that it supports the integration of SM while the latter should provide LINC instructors with the necessary support such as the reduction of the LINC instructors’ workload, the provision of timely technical support and ongoing professional development to enable them to use SM to supplement their teaching practices. The review of the literature has showed that introducing new educational technologies into the learning process changes both the tools and the pedagogical approaches used, something that is usually overlooked by institutional leaders (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Limitations

Several limitations of the current study need to be noted. First, the low response rate makes questionable the generalizability of findings (Creswell, 2014). In fact, research has shown that the larger the population, the more generalizable the results (Blair & Zinkhan, 2006). Related to the first limitation is the possibility that the overall positive perceptions held by all the respondents about the use of SM in English language learning may be attributed to a response bias where only LINC instructors with strong views about the topic participated in the study. The limitations of the study warrant future research that might investigate the perceptions of other stakeholders such as LINC students and administrators to see if they are on par with those of instructors.

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed some light on the perceptions of LINC instructors about the use of SM in English language learning, the barriers that exist, and the support needed to overcome these barriers. The study findings show that LINC instructors have positive attitudes about SM which can be effective pedagogical tools in English language instruction. However, barriers such as overloaded teaching schedules, lack of training and technical assistance that hamper SM integration do exist. This speaks to the LINC instructors' need for support in the form of professional development, institutional and technical support, and resources to make SM integration in LINC program possible and effective. The understanding gained from this study is aligned with the IRCC recommendations for the adoption of innovative approaches to supplement LINC instruction. One such intervention is the use of SM to provide LINC students with an authentic and engaging learning experience, which is critical for these newcomers' transition to life in Canada. Policymakers' and administrators' backing of LINC instructors is key to ensuring the LINC program addresses the needs of an increasingly diverse group of learners, which will ultimately impact all Canadians.

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