Students' Attitudes towards Using Social Networking in Foreign Language Classes: A Facebook Example

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate students' attitudes towards use of social networking sites, Facebook in particular, in language classroom. Social media has a great effect on people's lives and millions of students are spending many hours for social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube. Although millions of students are using these Web 2.0 tools worldwide, there hasn't been much research regarding the educational use of social networking. Considering the probable potential of these websites for educational use, this study was carried out at a university in Gaziantep, Turkey with 48 undergraduate students who were enrolled in one year compulsory English preparatory class. The research design included a 5 point Likert-type questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. It was found out that students have a very positive attitude towards the use of Facebook activity as a supplement to language classroom, but traditional classroom based language learning still remains a backbone for language education.

Keywords: social networking, social media, web 2.0, facebook, computer assisted language learning

Introductıon

Background Information

Teaching a language in the most effective way has always been an important issue for language teachers. The use of computers in language teaching dates back to 1960's and since that time, we see the shift of the role of computer from a mechanical tutor used primarily for drills into a real usage of language in an authentic context by students' self discoveries and developments (Lee 2000). When microcomputers entered in the daily life in 1970's, the era of computer assisted language learning has begun at schools and computers were used primarily for drilling activities in language classes. Computer assisted language learning (CALL) expanded in 1980's and 1990's with accessibility of personal computers for language learners. The use of internet in 2000's enabled educators to create web-based language programmes which allowed students to use language in real context. Today, millions of people are using social networking sites and online learning has arisen as one the most important and fastest moving trends in education (Palmer and Bray, 2001). Especially in recent years, social networking sites have become conspicuous genres, having hundreds millions of users worldwide (Selwyn, 2009).

Teachers from primary schools to universities have been using web assisted learning as a supplement to classroom and for delivering learning experiences (Hong, Lai and Holton, 2001). The rise of Web 2.0 tools which are described as the web-based services providing users visual, textual and interactive information has made social networking very popular all over the world (O'Reilly, 2005). There has been a great increase in the use of social networking sites like wikis, blogs, Myspace and Facebook (Bosch, 2009). The use of Web 2.0 technologies in every aspect of our lives has led researchers to consider the potential of social network use in education (Tılfarlıoğlu, 2011). Mason (2006) claims that social networking sites have enough capacity for a good 'official' education matching the social contexts of learning and promoting critical thinking in learners (Mason, 2006). There are even researchers contending that social networking sites have potential to change educational system radically, motivating students for better learning rather than being passive attendees of a classroom (Ziegler, 2007). Web 2.0 tools, like Youtube and Facebook have millions of users around the world. The use of Web 2.0 tools in education has gained popularity recently.

However, there is not enough research about applying social networking sites into the classroom and students' attitudes about the use of Web 2.0 tools in language teaching (Tılfarlıoğlu, 2011).

Facebook, as one of the most favoured social networking sites, has millions of users from primary schools to universities. On Facebook, people from all ages can create their own profiles, write each other's 'walls' and share their favourite photos and videos. It also has applications useful for teaching and learning. It is also a technological tool which can nurture the student-teacher relationship by creating positive learning experiences for both parties (Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007) There are some researchers who have considered this potential and carried out research regarding educational use of Facebook. Piriyasilpa (2010) conducted a research on the effects of application of Facebook as part of the classroom. She examined students' opinions about this activity and their use of language in their interaction. The study was conducted at a university in Thailand. The topics were advised by the teacher and students were asked to make comments or discuss their opinions on the teacher's wall. She found out that such incorporation was useful for students to create their social network and it was also beneficial for supporting language learning. On the other hand, Bosch (2009) carried out a study about exploring student use of Facebook and lecturer engagement with students via social media at the University of Cape Town.

The article showed that while there are positive benefits to using Facebook for academic purposes, there might be certain challenges like computer literacy and uneven access. She conducted a semi-structured qualitative interview with a sample of 50 undergraduate students and five lecturers. In her research, she sorted out the use of Facebook for various aims like social networking, identity construction, concerns with privacy and the potential use of Facebook for academic purposes. Another researcher Selwyn (2009), conducted a study to explore students' education-related use of Facebook. His research examined the social significance of the Facebook social networking site in the lives of undergraduate university students (N=909) in the UK. In particular his study investigated the realities of students' Facebook activity and considered the role that Facebook is playing in the wider 'student experience' of twenty-first century university education. He wanted to learn when and for what purposes were students using Facebook; what aspects of their interactions via Facebook can be considered to be related to their university education; what evidence was there for Facebook use contributing to the increased (dis)engagement of students with their university studies and what can be said to be 'new' about the nature and outcomes of students' use of Facebook. Analyzing the data, he asserts that Facebook use must be seen as identity politics of being a student rather than enhancing front stage engagement with formal studies.

Statement of the Problem

English language teaching has mostly been classroom based due to the rare opportunites students encounter outside the classroom. Social networking sites have the potential to make learning more student centered (Al-Shehri, 2011). Facebook is one of the Web 2.0 tools having various applications for education. When we think about the millions of students using Facebook, we cannot ignore its potential as an educational tool (Bosch, 2009). Thus, considering the difficulties that my students come across while learning grammar and vocabulary, the idea of integrating a web supported instruction with the traditional one flashed in my mind. There are many examples of web site supported (e-learning) and computer assisted programs that help teachers to integrate them into the curriculum, but these examples have some limitations. Many teachers have websites but interaction can be limited as those webpages are mostly static. Additionally, if there is a campus-based website, the location of this website might limit teachers as administrators can monitor the websites and they might control the content teachers share. Also, students are often unwilling to do asynchronous computer exercises (Mazer et al. 2007). Thus, the researcher decided to use 'closed group' function of Facebook. A total number of 48 students enrolled at the closed group feature of Facebook, in which only group members can interact with each other. This article focuses on academic use of Facebook as a support to the curriculum. In this study, The researcher wanted to learn students' attitudes towards using social networking in language teaching at an English preparatory class.

1.3. Research Questions

1) What are the pre-intermediate level English preparatory class students' attitudes towards using social networking in language classes?
2) Is social networking useful for improving pre-intermediate level preparatory class students' language skills?

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling and Participants

The study was carried out at a university in Gaziantep, Turkey and lasted for one semester from September 2011 to January in 2012. The participants were 48 pre-intermediate level students, aged between 18-22 who were taking one-year compulsory English preparation from different majors like medicine, engineering and tourism. The sample consisted of 27 males and 21 females, with an average of 19.5 years. As medium of the instruction is in English at this university, students who cannot pass the proficiency exam need to attend to the preparation class which aimed to equip students with proficiency in skills of language. In this study, the researcher employed Facebook activity to provide students with an alternative to assist them to learn the subjects better. The researcher created a closed-group on Facebook and I posted supplementary activities on daily basis (see Appendix for examples of illustration).. Both the teacher and the students used a wall on which they could discuss their opinions and share any educational and interesting photos, videos and links to useful websites. At the end of the semester, the reasearcher distributed a questionnaire and interviewed students to investigate their attitudes toward the activity.

2.2 Instruments

For the quantitative data, a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to investigate students' attitudes toward the benefits of the Facebook group. 48 students attended to the Facebook group but 40 of them responded to the questionnaire. Students were asked to decide at which level they agreed with the following statements (1= totally disagree and 5= totally agree). For the qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was carried out with five randomly selected students and the researcher asked their opinions about the utility of applying social networking in language learning.

2.3 Research Design

The Facebook supported language learning activity lasted for one semester. At the end of the semester, students were given out a twenty-item attitude questionnaire adapted from Vandeveatere and Desmet's (2009) 'The case of measuring attitude towards CALL: Computer Assisted Learning' questionnaire and a semi-structured interview was carried out with ten students. The questionnaire items for CALL study were modified to include Facebook references instead of computer. The items in the questionnaire were categorized according to the research questions. The Cronbach's Alpha value was found to be $\alpha= 0.83$ showing that the questionnaire has high internal validity. The interview questions were prepared with a consultant and were applied to two independent groups in order to see if groups understand the same thing from the interview questions. A tape recorder and a transcription notebook were used to record and to transcribe the interviewees' answers.

Table 1 illustrates the mapping of questionnaire items.

Table 1. Mapping Qustionnaire Items

Questionnaire Items	
Opinions for Facebook Use in Education	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
Improving Language Skills on Facebook	Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8
Efficacy of Facebook Supported Learning in Comparison with Traditional Learning	Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13
Efficacy of Facebook Exercises	Q14, Q15, Q16, Q17, Q18
Utility of Feedback on Facebook	Q19, Q20

Findings and Discussion

3.1 Analysis of the Quantitative Data

40 students (N=40) formed the subjects of this research. Tables provide the mean ratings and the frequency distributions in percentages for questionnaire items. As seen in the overall mean of Table 2, it is clear that % 68.6 of the students ranked their scores 'agree' to 'totally agree' in comparison to % 16.8 who ranked their scores 'disagree' to 'totally disagree'. Thus, %68.6 of the students thought that Facebook can be used for education.

Table 2. Opinions for Facebook Use in Education (N=40)

	Mean	Frequency (%)		
		disagree	undecided	agree
Q1	3.4	27.5	7.5	65
Q2	3.9	5	7.5	87.5
Q3	3.5	20	22.5	57.5
Q4	3.6	15	20	65
Overall Mean		16.85	14.37	68.6

Table 3 expresses the efficiency of Facebook for improving language skills, namely, grammar, vocabulary knowledge, listening and writing. It is seen that % 61,5 of the students, ranking this section 'agree' to 'totally agree' find Facebook as a useful tool for mastering their language proficiency.

Table 3. Improving Language Skills on Facebook (N=40)

	Mean	Frequency (%)		
		disagree	undecided	agree
Q5	3.3	22.5	30	47.5
Q6	4.05	5	12.5	82.5
Q7	3.4	22.5	17.5	60
Q8	3.5	15	30	55
Overall Mean		16.2	22.5	61.5

Table 4 illustrates the efficacy of Facebook supported learning in comparison with classical classroom based learning. The overall mean for question items 9,10,11 and 12 is %71.5 meaning students favour Facebook as an considerable extension to classical learning. However for the question item 13, students ranked their scores as % 70 from 'totally disagree' to 'disagree'. This question is about whether students regard Facebook supported learning as valuable as traditional learning. The scores show that although students think Facebook as a considerable activity for learning, they support traditional education as a backbone for their studies.

Table 4. Efficacy of Facebook Supported Learning in Comparison with Traditional Learning (N=40)

	Mean	Frequency (%)		
		disagree	undecided	agree
Q9	3.9	7.5	17.5	75
Q10	3.5	20	20	60
Q11	3.6	12.5	17.5	70
Q12	3.4	12.5	37.5	80
Q13	2.1	70	20	10
Overall Mean		24.4	22.5	53

As seen from overall mean of Table 5, % 59 of students find the exercises on Facebook useful. The questions 17 and 18 are about efficacy of these exercises for inhibited students and as students' personalities are varied, they ranked these scores according to their characteristics.

Table 5. Efficacy of Facebook Exercises (N=40)

	Mean	Frequency (%)		
		disagree	undecided	agree
Q14	3.5	22.5	10	67.5
Q15	3.5	20	10	70
Q16	3.5	7.5	32.5	60
Q17	3.7	15	22.5	62.5
Q18	3	37.5	27.5	35
Overall Mean		20.5	20.4	59

Table 6 expresses whether feedbacks on Facebook are useful for students. It is clear that %70 of students find feedbacks useful in comparison to only %5 of them disagree. One another thing worthes mentioning is that feedbacks in this group are open for every student, allowing each of them to make a peer-review together with the teacher.

Table 6. Utility of Feedback on Facebook (N=40)

	Mean	Frequency (%)		
		disagree	undecided	agree
Q19	3.8	7.5	22.5	70
Q20	3.8	2.5	27.5	70
Overall Mean		5	25	70

Analysis of the Qualitative Data

Having administering the questionnaire, the researcher interviewed five randomly selected students in order to get their feelings and opinions about the utility of social networking in their learning process. After transcribing the interviews, it was found out that students' attitudes towards this activity are very positive, which supports the results of the questionnaire items. Interview results show that students favour integrating social networking with their traditional classroom. Although all interviewees basically support such kind of learning, there were also some notable comments from students. Below are some related parts of the interview transcriptions:

Student A:

" … my English courses have always been very boring but in this activity I felt myself quite relax. I spend very much time on Facebook and really do nothing at all for hours. In this way, while I was checking what's happening among my friends, I also checked our group to learn something more…"
It is interesting that student A is usually sleepy during the classes but on digital environment, she answers all the questions. We can say that students learn better when a subject is presented in a more appealing way.

Student B:

"… I was thinking that my friends would laugh at me if I made a mistake when I answer a question in the classroom. However, on our online group, I can really answer the questions more than half of the class and this give me a courage to participate more in our classroom…."
On the other hand, Student B finds this activity very useful for her personal development. Although he was very reluctant to answer the questions in classroom initially, he became a much more active participant of the classroom with the help of socializing in social network.

Student C:

"... of course it (Facebook group) is useful. I think online learning is much easier and more useful than only classroom based learning but they must be together. Grammar books are boring but finding an appropriate information on the internet is also difficult. Thus, this kind of group work is the best I think."
Student C's opinions reflects a very important point there. Although we are just a click away from sea of information, it is not always easy to find the suitable information. Also, we may say that students still accept the traditional classroom teaching as a backbone for their studies.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research was to explore students' attitudes towards a Facebook supported language teaching. The findings suggest that Facebook can be very useful as an educational tool. Students' attitudes towards such an activity are mostly positive. Students welcomed using social networking site as a supplementary to the curriculum. Most students showed that they love spending time on Facebook and exercises, videos and other sharing in group are useful for improving their language skills. There are many computer based language programs but students expect something more professional and may not view these programs as interactive experiences (Mazer et al., 2007). Considering the limitations of computer based programs, such an activity can be a good alternative to improve language skills. This activity is also useful for breaking ice with students. Although there is not much study considering the academic use of Facebook, educators are becoming aware of the possibilities for reaching students with learning materials via Facebook (Bosch 2009).

Teachers considering applying such an activity in their classrooms need to be sensitive in some points. First of all, learning goals must be defined clearly.

That will allow group members what to do and share for the relevant activity. Also, use of native language should be avoided. Otherwise, the teacher might find himself/herself in the middle of severe quarrels among students for trivial matters.

This study was limited with expressing students' opinions on the use of social networking at university level. A detailed research might be carried out regarding students' attitudes at high school level. Additionally, teachers' opinions and inclinations about the use of Web 2.0 tools in foreign language classrooms can be investigated to see the applicability of such an activity.

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Appendix

Some Illustrations from the Examples of Activities