

Exploring the Students' Perception and Uses of Facebook as an Academic Tool

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Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude exploratoire pour évaluer l'utilisation de 10 étudiants post graduant d'un outil de réseaux sociaux - Facebook- spécifiquement créé pour des raisons d'études. L'étude comporte une analyse quantitative et qualitative des messages sur la page Facebook et un questionnaire développé par le chercheur et vise à explorer les modèles d'utilisation de Facebook en général et le potentiel pédagogique de la page. Les résultats ont démontré que les étudiants, en créant cet espace personnel et en l'utilisant pour communiquer avec leurs pairs et leurs enseignants, ont non seulement un fort sentiment d'engagement communautaire - les étudiants ont utilisé une grande variété d'outils de communication pour communiquer avec leurs pairs. Mais aussi une plus grande satisfaction de ce média comme outil efficace dans le développement de leur compétence socio-pragmatique via une interaction linguistique authentique.

Mots Clés : Réseau Social, Facebook, Sens De La Communauté, Compétence Pragmatique

Abstract

This paper reports on the use of Facebook page created by 10 post-graduate students for educational purposes. The study involves a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of data obtained from postings on the Facebook page and from a questionnaire developed by the researcher. The study aims at exploring students' usage patterns and perceptions of the value of this social networking tool and uncovering its potential role in an educational environment. The results showed that students, by creating this personal space and using it to connect with their peers and their teachers, not only have a strong sense of community involvement students have used a wide variety of communication tools to communicate with their peers, but also greater satisfaction of this medium as an effective tool in developing their socio-pragmatic competence via authentic linguistic interaction.

Key words: Social networking, Facebook, Sense of community, Pragmatic competence

الملخص

تقدم هذه المقالة دراسة استكشافية عن استخدام صفحة الفيسبوك التي أنشأها 10 طلاب الدراسات العليا لأغراض تعليمية. تضمنت الدراسة تحليلاً كمياً ونوعياً للبيانات التي تم الحصول عليها من المنشورات على صفحة الفيسبوك ومن استبيان أعده الباحث. تهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف أنماط استخدام الطلاب وتصوراتهم حول قيمة أداة التواصل الاجتماعي هذه وكشف دورها المحتمل في بيئة تعليمية. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب، من خلال خلق هذه المساحة الشخصية واستخدامها للتواصل مع أقرانهم ومعلميهم، ليس لديهم فقط شعور قوي بالمشاركة المجتمعية. فقد استخدم الطلاب مجموعة واسعة من أدوات التواصل للتواصل مع أقرانهم، ولكن أيضاً المزيد من الرضا من هذه الوسيلة كأداة فعالة في تطوير الكفاءة الاجتماعية والبراغماتية من خلال التفاعل اللغوي الحقيقي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، الفيسبوك، الإحساس بالانتماء للمجتمع، الكفاءة البراغماتية

1. Introduction

This paper reports some of the results from a research project to evaluate 10 post-graduate students' experience of utilizing a group Facebook page as an academic tool to connect with each other as well as with their teachers. The focus of the study is the pedagogical potential that this social network tool has with a group of users that share similar educational interests in regard to building a sense of community as well as developing socio-pragmatic competence through authentic language interaction.

1 Review of Relevant Literature

The last decades have witnessed much research on emerging computer-mediated communication and social networking tools and their potential impact on fostering the sense of community among students in educational contexts in general and language classrooms in particular. This section reviews some of the related literature and sheds light on importance of implementing such tools as Facebook into the L2 classroom.

1.1 Computer Mediated Communication and Social Networking

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is defined as "the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages" (Romiszowski and Robin Mason, 2004, p. 398). According to Toliver (2011, p. 65), the value of social networking lies in "the collective power of community to help inform perspectives that would not be unilaterally formed - e.g., the best thinking comes from many not one."

Research on CMC focuses largely on the social effects of different computer-supported communication technologies involving Internet-based social networking such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, Twitter, Nexopia, and Bebo which attract millions of users. These sites can be

oriented towards work-related contexts (e.g., LinkedIn.com), romantic relationship initiation (the original goal of Friendster.com), connecting those sites with shared interests such as music or politics (e.g., MySpace.com), or the college student population (the original incarnation of Facebook.com) (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007).

1.2 Using Social Network Sites for Educational Purposes

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) could be defined as "virtual communities which allow people to connect and interact with each other on a particular subject or just hang out together online" (Dogruer, Menevis, & Eyyam, 2011, p. 2642). They allow individuals to: (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p.211)

Because of the proliferation and growing popularity of SNSs, researchers have begun to investigate the educational applications and outcomes of this technology (Huang, Yoo, and Choi (2008; Karpinski and Duberstein, 2009, cited in Ophus & Abbit, 2009), more particularly in relation to language learning because it provides opportunities for language learners to practise their language. In one of several early studies, Warschauer (1996) analysed the nature of CMC and its potential in fostering collaborative language learning. According to him, CMC brings together the concepts of expression, interaction, reflection, problem solving, critical thinking, and literacy. These notions "are tied together through various uses of talk, text, inquiry, and collaboration in the classroom" (Romiszowski and Mason, 2004, p. 405).

However, the potential benefits of these technologies to positively affect student learning remain questionable (Ophus & Abbit, 2009). In other words, the questions are to what extent and how students learn through them and thus to what extent these tools should be formally encouraged and used in learning across higher education (Coutts et al., 2007, cited in Murphy & Webster, 2008)

Attitudes to using social network sites for educational purposes are diverse. Critics such as Junco (2001) question the efficacy of such tools, stating that they are a distraction which results in a decrease in academic performance. The same view is further supported by other researchers such as Kirschner & Karpinski (2010) who reported a negative relationship between FB use and academic achievement in a survey study involving Facebook use as measured by self-reported grade point average (GPA) and hours spent studying per week. In other words, the survey showed that Facebook users reported having lower GPAs and spend fewer hours per week studying than nonusers. Other researchers expressed concerns related to identity presentation, and privacy (e.g., Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Stutzman, 2006). According to Gross and Acquisti (2005), social network user may be putting themselves at risk both offline (e.g., stalking) and online (e.g., identify theft) by disclosing private and identifiable information in their profiles.

On the other hand, technology proponents have responded by endorsing other studies supporting the notion of using social network sites in education. For example, O'Sullivan et al., 2004 noted that, "students who viewed an instructor's website with high levels of mediated immediacy, including forms of self-disclosure, reported high levels of motivation and effective learning, indicating positive attitudes toward the course and the teacher" (p.2). Another survey by Hewitt & Forte, 2006, showed that two-thirds of the students surveyed were "comfortable" with faculty on Facebook. Another study by Fischman (2008, cited

in Muñoz & Towner, 2009) showed that 39% of college students surveyed wanted regular on-line discussions with faculty. In sum, advocates of technology use see social media 'as a necessary tool for student engagement to promote learning and development, both within and outside of the classroom' Mercer (2012).

Regarding this study, we argue that CMC in an educational setting could foster learning and promote a strong sense of learning community.

1.3 Pedagogical Practices of Facebook

Facebook was originally designed for college students in the United States (Harvard) in early 2004; it has become a social networking website of choice by university students and a significant part of college experience. Facebook connects students with other students, indirectly creating a learning community – a vital component of student education (Baker, 1999, cited in Muñoz & Towner, 2009 pp: 4-5).

1.3.1 Community building via Facebook

The term "sense of community" (SOC) is defined in a variety of ways. McMillan & Chavis (1986) define SOC as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p 9). According to them, SOC consists of the following four characteristics: (i) Membership, boundaries, belonging, and group symbols; (ii) Feelings of influence: Feelings of having influence on, and being influenced by the community; (iii) Integration and fulfillment of needs i.e. exchange of support among members; and (iv) Shared emotional connections among members. Thus, SOC is treated as having the following dimensions 'mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, trust, interactivity and shared expectations and goals'. These positive characteristics give members of a group 'an intrinsically rewarding reason to continue participation in such a group' (Kuo, 2003;

Whitworth & De Moor, 2003, Cited in Blattner and Fiori, 2009, p20).

1.3.2 Development of socio-pragmatic competence via Facebook

According to Crystal (1997, p. 301), pragmatics refers to “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication.” In similar fashion, Kasper & Rose (2001, p. 2) define pragmatics as “the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context.” On the other hand, pragmatic competence refers to both the knowledge and the ability of the speaker to engage in appropriate communicative actions with the right people in the right places and at the right times (Belz, 2007).

Walther (1996) argues that ‘CMC relationships are as deeply relational as those that occur face-to-face (F2F)’ and claims ‘that in comparison to F2F communication, CMC interaction is not different in kind, but typically mediates a slower rate of social information exchange’ (Walther, 1996, p. 10, as cited in Thorne 2003) and that “as goes [F2F], so goes CMC, given the opportunity for message exchange and accompanying relational development” (p. 11). Thorne (2003) states that when language learners are placed in a broader context of important relationships such as those provided by internet-mediated partnerships, learning outcomes in the field of pragmatics are considerably improved.

1.3.3 Pedagogical advantages of Facebook

According to Towner, VanHorn, and Parker (2007), there are a plethora of positive reasons to integrate Facebook into the classroom. Because of its inexpensive nature, Facebook can provide various pedagogical benefits to both teachers and students.

The ease of education-related interactions and exchanges between students facing the common problem of accomplishing their degree courses is

seen as one of the primary educational assets of Facebook (Selwyn, 2009). As Smith and Peterson (2007, p.278) put it, “knowledge is not constructed in an individual vacuum, but in the communication and exchanges embedded in social networks” (Cited in Selwyn, 2009). In particular, social networking sites, such as Facebook, offer users a more active and participatory role and “mirror much of what we know to be good models of learning in that they are collaborative and encourage active participatory role by the user” (Maloney 2007, p.26). As Smith and Peterson (2007, p.279) further add, “By telling another classmate what the professor covered in class, the student has an opportunity to further process the information, even restructuring it within their thoughts. Repetition and restructuring both improve learning”. Another study by Hamann and Wilson (2002, as cited in Muñoz & Towner, 2009) showed that students who participated in a web-assisted class performed better than those students in a traditional lecture format. Facebook also intensifies both teacher-student and student-student interaction in the form of web-based communication. Teacher-students interaction may involve the communication of upcoming events, useful links, and samples of work outside of the classroom. Student-student interaction, on the other hand, may relate to issues related to communicating class assignments or examinations and cooperating on assignments and group projects in an online environment. (Muñoz & Towner, 2009).

2. Methodology

The current study is exploratory; it aims at exploring students’ usage patterns and perceptions of the value of Facebook and uncovering its potential role in Algerian university environment. This would be the basis for developing teaching and learning activities that would accommodate social networking tools in a manner compatible with student expectations and perceptions of value,

enhance teaching pedagogy, and deepen our general theoretical understanding of web-based collaboration and social interaction for language learning. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following questions.

2.1 Research Question

1. To what extent did the group Facebook page succeed in providing constructive pedagogical educational outcomes?

a. To what extent did it impact the development of the sense of community?

b. To what extent did it develop the students' socio-pragmatic competence?

c. To what extent did it enhance the level of interaction between the students and their teachers?

2.2 Research Method

With the above research question in mind, the present paper reports on a systematic study of the Facebook postings of 10 postgraduate students, studying at Sétif University during six months. Access to the group was limited to Facebook members that have been exclusively invited by the students. The researcher was invited to join the group alongside other teachers – setting up a Facebook account under her real name within the students' page. She was, thus, participating and interacting directly with the students. In this participant role, the researcher logged onto facebook almost on a daily basis. She systematically archived exchanges between students from their various Facebook 'walls', observing and noting the characteristics and qualities of other content as it developed.

In addition to the data gathered from the facebook postings, a questionnaire was administered to the students in order to gather information about their use of Facebook in general and the pedagogical potential of the page in particular. The sixteen-item questionnaire comprised three sections; the first section (Q1-Q8) is introductory; it contains a set of personal data (gender, age) and addresses whether

the participant has Facebook account or not, the frequency of using Facebook, the purpose/purposes for which he/she uses Facebook. The second section (Q9-Q11) reflects different aspects in which a student uses the Facebook page; 3-point Liker scale was used to range the responses of such questions; where 3= agree, and 1= do not. The third section (Q12 & Q16) contains questions that involve the students to evaluate the current use of the page and propose any further suggestions. Below is a selection and analysis of some of the questions.

3.3. Results

This section will display the results of the facebook postings, the results of the questionnaire, and then compare the results of the two tools.

3.3.1 Facebook postings

When the postings were analysed, two main themes emerged from the data, that is student-student exchanges, and teacher-student exchanges. Student-student exchanges involve exchange of practical information like: lectures schedule, course-related links (audio and video files), comments for the rest of the class to see. Student-teacher exchanges, on the other hand, involve: the place and time of the class, assignments, announcements, and documents, ebooks and educational links.

3.3.1.1 Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis involves the total number of publications from December, 24th, to June, 14th which reached 188 postings. This gives us an average of 31.33 publications per month. The detailed distribution per month is given in the table below.

Table 01: Distribution of Facebook Postings

Month	Postings	Percentage
January	90	47.88 %
February	19	10.10 %
March	26	13.82 %
April	25	13.30%
May	17	09.05%
June	11	05.85%
Total Number	188	100%

From the above table, one can notice the declining number of postings from January to June. This can be explained by three factors: Firstly, the first month (January), receiving the highest percentage of publications (47.88%), was mostly dedicated to inviting members to join the group, publishing timetables, and posting reading lists given by some teachers. Secondly, the heavy work load (assignments were set up right at the start of the different courses) leaving little time to the students to log onto Facebook. Thirdly, the use of email accounts both for sending/ receiving reading/research assignments and for other notifications. To take but one example, the teacher/ researcher has exchanged 72 individual and grouped emails in the same period. In this respect, we can assert the complementarity between the two web tools.

3.3.1.2 Qualitative analysis

The quantitative analysis involves the types of publications that the members used to interact between one another. Globally, these publications were categorised into five rubrics as follows: (i) Interaction and feedback, (ii) Sharing information and keeping updates, (iii) Posting course-related links, (iv) Posting assignments, and (v) Posting photos. Below is a detailed account of these publications in terms of number of occurrences and percentage.

Table 02: Types of Facebook Postings

Type of publication	Number	Percentage
Interaction and feedback: adding comments , answering requests, thanking, sending feedback on the links, sending supportive statements)	131	69.68
Sharing information, keeping updates: notifications , lectures schedules, making requests, updating schedules, adding new members)	33	17.55
Posting Course-related links	18	09.57
Posting assignments	02	01.06
Posting photos	04	02.12
Total	188	100%

3.3.2 Questionnaire

This section presents the results of the questionnaire. Regarding the question of whether or not they possess an account on Facebook, the totality of the students said that they possess a Facebook account. As for the time spent logged on Facebook, 62.5% of the students say that they log on a daily basis. As for the purposes behind using Facebook, 62.5% of the respondents say that use it more for social uses (to stay in touch with friends, to share / tag photos, to engage in social activism) and 37.5% use it more for academic purposes, more specifically for getting information.

When asked about the reasons for creating the page, the participants gave various reasons that are displayed in the table below.

Table 03: Reasons for creating the Facebook Page

Reason	Number	Percentage
to keep in touch with post graduate students in sétif and throughout Algeria as well as with teachers	06	75%
to get updated of the latest news as to study scheduled sessions	03	37.5%
to share information and exchange benefits	03	37.5%
To share new links being brought about that have to do with useful topics to ESP generally and Business English in particular	02	12.5%
To upload assignments (12.5%)	02	12.5%

The participants were also asked to rate how much they agreed with 13 statements about the use of the Facebook page on a three-point scale (agree, don't agree, don't know). The results confirmed the importance of the group Facebook page in creating a

community of learners in educational environment with 87.5% of the respondents who agreed that the page enhances a sense of belonging and group commitment and developing a sense of community (*Research Question 2*). Another 87.5 % of the respondents agreed that page is beneficial for the students' pragmatic development (language use in specific contexts such as apologizing, greeting, formulating requests among other illocutionary acts.) (*Research Question 3*). The same percentage (87.5%) of respondents also agreed that the page provides immediate, individualized opportunities to interact with peers, and instructors. (*Research Question 4*); however, 62.5% of them disagree with the statement that the Facebook page offers authentic language interaction. Interestingly, there were no significant results regarding the role of the page in providing constructive pedagogical outcomes, or enhances involvement with academic programs. (*Research Question 1*). This last finding may be explained by the fact that only two teachers (out of seven) were members of the group, and the latter's contribution was relatively poor compared to the students' contribution.

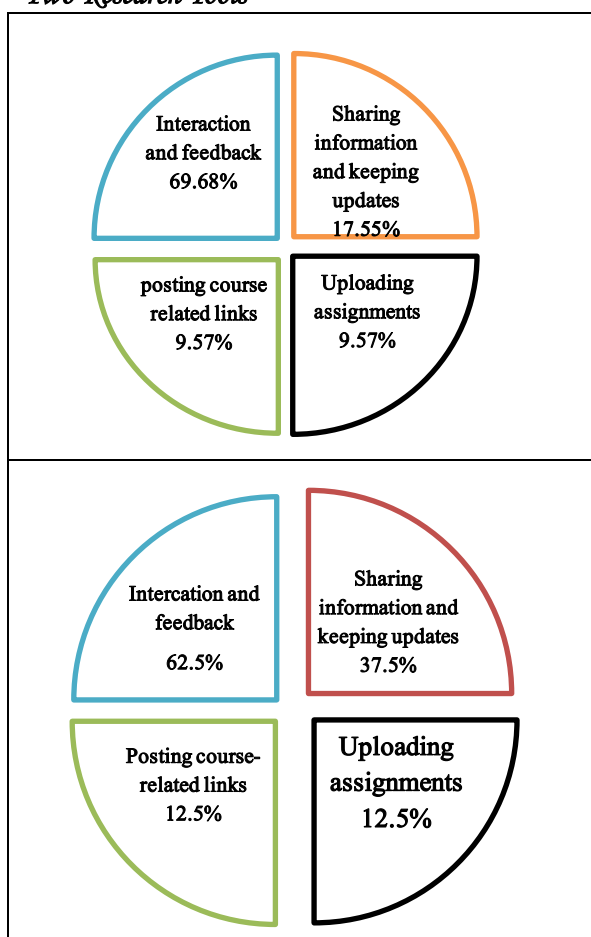
3. 3.3. Comparison of the Results of the Two Research Tools

A close look at the Facebook postings shows that the highest percentage (69.68%) goes to the rubric that we named 'interaction and feedback' and relates to the primary role that Facebook was developed for, that is building bonds between users that share a common interest or activity and keeping them connected socially and academically. This positive characteristic is particularly rewarding in the sense that it encourages the members to continue participation in such a group (Kuo, 2003; Whitworth & De Moor, 2003). This finding is consistent with the results of the questionnaire where 62.5% of the respondents said that they use Facebook more for social than academic uses and where another 75% stated that the particular reason

for creating the page was to keep in touch with colleagues in sétif and throughout Algeria, as well as with teachers.

In the second position comes the 'Sharing information and keeping updates' rubric with 17.55% of the total number of postings. This is also consistent with the results of the questionnaire with these two purposes coming in the second position, but receiving higher percentages (37.5% each). Posting Course-related links and uploading assignments came in the third and fourth positions with 9.57% and 2.12% respectively (Facebook postings); whereas, in the questionnaire answers they came in the third position, with 12.5 % each. Overall, we can say that both research methods revealed consistent and very close results. The above information is displayed in the figure below.

Figure1: Comparison of the Results of the Two Research Tools



Facebook Postings

Questionnaire

Answers In sum, the above data suggests that Facebook has been established as an important place where students can familiarise themselves with the 'identity politics' of being a student (Selwyn, p.19).

4. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Limitations

This study proved highly revealing about the benefits and the necessity to integrate technology in our classes. Furthermore, it may be considered as a pilot study, which would offer awareness to the educational institutions to use Facebook in the academic setting. Because technological innovations are undeniable, administrators, faculty, and policy makers must recognise and accept this important evolution in societal communication standards. In addition, instructors should extend their 'pedagogical portfolio' and adapt their pedagogical stance to integrate useful and versatile electronic tools that will improve the quality of their classrooms, guide learners to use various tools for academic purposes, and create a dynamic learning environment (Blattner and Fiori, 2009). On the other hand, researchers should continue to explore these alternative teaching tools to determine whether

"the benefit of creating cyber learning communities to complement the traditional classroom experience is worth the cost of retooling and restructuring" (Muñoz & Towner, 2009, p.9-10). An extensive program of research is also needed to gain a better understanding of the social, affective, and cognitive processes involved in computer-mediated collaborative learning. Last, but not least, student perceptions of these e-tools will be crucial to their success and will help researchers develop effective teaching strategies. Effective teaching practices are discussed, because, as Prensky (2006) accurately states: "it's time for education leaders to raise their heads above the daily grind and observe the new landscape that's emerging". (Blattner and Fiori, (2009, p18)

Finally, issues of the generalisability of these findings for subjects other than the post graduate students represented in our study remains to be reviewed. A large scale study with more participants would provide more data, and therefore a more reliable view. There is a need and a necessity to conduct further studies in this context that would target the key variables that impact the acceptance of Facebook as a part of the virtual educational environment

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