

Student's Perceptions on Using Facebook for Learning English at Al-Anbar University

Majida Ibrahim Mukhlif

Ministry of Education- General Directorate of Education in Al –Anbar

Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the benefit of using social network technology, specifically the Facebook, as a studying help for English department of undergraduate students at Al-Anbar University. Participants were one hundred and twenty students to elicit information on their ongoing social network usage and their expected use of the Facebook to learn English language. The results of the study confirmed that there were many remarks belonging to privacy, and much confusion on using the Facebook for English lessons in particular and school work in general.

Keywords: Facebook, English Learning, Social networks, Perceptions.

تصورات الطلبة حول استخدام الفيسبوك لتعلم اللغة الانكليزية في جامعة الانبار

ماجدة ابراهيم مخلف سليمان

وزارة التربية /المديرية العامة لتربية الانبار

الملخص

يسعى البحث إلى تحديد الفائدة من استخدام تقنية الشبكات الاجتماعية، وعلى وجه التحديد الفيسبوك، كمساعد دراسة لقسم اللغة الإنجليزية من طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في جامعة الأنبار. وتستخدم الدراسة مائة وعشرون طالب للحصول على معلومات عن استخدام الشبكة الاجتماعية الحالية واستخدامها المحتمل للفيسبوك لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن هناك تعليقات كبيرة فيما يتعلق بجوانب الخصوصية، وإمكانات التنشيط على استخدام دروس الفيسبوك للغة الإنجليزية بشكل خاص والعمل المدرسي بشكل عام.

INTRODUCTION

Long periods of time have spent by researchers in the search for using new technology that have a large role in the processes of learning, where linked to modern technology and means of communication with the processes of learning for students. At present, with the increasing number of social networks and the construction of communication networks, millions of people have relied to communicate with their families and friends and to present themselves through the participation of private video clips, photos and the formation of special collections for education and entertainment and also use many important applications in their lives.

Social networks are developed programs to facilitate the process of interaction between individuals and groups, to support social relationships and to provide different options for social responses as cited by Boyd (2003). The idea of using the Facebook in academic environment initiated in Harvard University where students engaged themselves with Face booking in the year 2004. Later, schools became widespread and public property for all. Facebook is the second largest social network in the world in terms of use by teenagers, where it observed that its use had increased rapidly. Through Facebook can be found friends, photos, music, games, organizations, ideas, e-commerce can be found with the possibility of their use in education due the large numbers of users.

In recent years, social networks have seen significant growth, and this growth was identified in 2005 in the Horizon Report as a modern technology using in teaching and learning processes. Facebook is one of the most important means of social communication, which helps people to communicate with their friends, families and friends at work to know what is happening in the world (Facebook 2008).

The many functions and features that provided by Facebook have made people use Facebook in chat rooms and messages as well as to share photos, videos and many contents. Facebook provides many facilities, such as the establishment of groups that facilitate communication to students to communicate among themselves, as well as the work of online calendars and the creation of educational cards that allow teachers to publish seminars for viewing and benefits. (Jacobs, 2008).

More than 80 million users were active users of Facebook in 2004. In US universities (Facebook, 2008), Facebook had a market share of 85% for 4 years. The most Facebook users are young Americans. About 55% of total online American users are youth ages 12-17 (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). As one of the studies that worked at 2006 at university of North Carolina, Chapel Hill indicated that 90% of university students were using facebook (Stutzman, 2006).

The positive social networking sites and their impact on students cannot be denied, but the question remains in any system of technology designed for social interaction and is to be used in the process of education must contain new educational activities to keep pace with development. There are many educational activities are done during the teaching of learning processes and other technologies. This study emphasizes the exploration of students' perceptions and their answers to some basic questions, to reach good and useful practices and suggestions when using the means of communication in the processes of teaching English.

The present study intends to make use of the Facebook in facilitating English teaching and learning among the EFL students. Based on this, the most popular online social networking is Facebook, meaningful learning environments among students, could be used to support, enhance and strengthen English communication among EFL students. In facilitating language learning, the Facebook could prove to be a boon if utilized well. The discussion of this paper as stated above is going to focus on how to utilize the Facebook in facilitating the teaching of the English language to non native English speakers. There are many ways through which the teacher could utilize the Facebook in the teaching English language. Creating groups of students on Facebook by the teacher and communicating with them on Facebook and informing their language when sending messages are essential. It should give them enough time, instructions and guidance to improve their performance and communicate with members constantly so they can share ideas and interact with others easily.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To explore students' perceptions at Al-Anbar university who currently using social networking systems for improving their communication skills and academic activities.
2. To find the perceived level of using the Facebook in learning English language at Al-Anbar University.
3. To discover the problems that facing students regarding to using the Facebook in learning English.

Research Questions

1. To what degree are students at Al- Anbar university currently use social networking systems to improve their communication skills and academic activities?
2. What is the perceived level of using Facebook for English learning among students at Al-Anbar University?
3. What are the problems that encounter students regarding using Facebook in learning English?

Significance of the Study

The researcher hopes that this study will enable educators and researchers to identify and comprehend how online social networking platforms like the Facebook, can facilitate English language learning. In addition, the results of the study will provide a better picture of how the foreign language learners improve their language performance through online social networking platforms, especially in terms of reading, writing, and vocabulary development. In mind, researchers and policy makers in education will be able to devise and develop specific, appropriate and creative pedagogical ideas or methods that make effective use of the Facebook in facilitating the English language learning.

Literature Review

The rapid developments witnessed by the world in many different field of life, which came in the form of technology has affected, in one way or another, most aspects of human life; one of these field is education (Tezci, 2009). The integration of the technology in educational teaching and learning processes needs new ways and methods represented by providing the learner with some knowledge and necessary skills as well developing the quality of education (Caves et al., 2009). The literature stated that the contribution of computers in teaching has a great impact on learners and teachers and motivate them. In 2004, Facebook has been created; the reports stated that more than 21 million registered members in 2007, as well more than 1.6 page views every day (Needham & Company, 2007).

This site is used to promote the daily media of its users, where the user spends 20 minutes a day visiting the site, and more than two- thirds of users log on to his page at least once a day (Cassidy, 2006; Needham & Company, 2007). Facebook launched a version of the high school to express its success among students of universities in early September 2005. In addition, Facebook introduced commercial organizations in November 2006, which led to have about 22,000 organizations. Because of these privileges, Facebook has been used in more than 2000 colleges in the United States, so Facebook become the most popular site in the numbers of views in the world (Cassidy 2006).

Gross and Acquisti (2005) pointed to the danger of using Facebook because of the amount of information provided by participants about themselves in Facebook, relatively open information and lack of privacy controls; where users can be hacked or stalked. “Other recent research on the Facebook examines students perceptions of instructor presence and self disclosure” (Mazer, et.al., 2007; Hewitt & Forte, 2006), “temporal patterns of use” (Golder,et.al., 2007), “and the relationship between profile structure and friendship articulation” (Lampe, et. al., 2007). Despite the negative results in using Facebook, which stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of their audience on Facebook, we are interested in cases that target users' personal files. The results of the study show that the use of Facebook among the students is linked to their language ability generated by online tools. The results of that study show that the Facebook use among college-age respondents was significantly associated with their language ability.

Theoretical Underpinning Governing the Idea of Learning in the Facebook Environment

There are many studies that examined the use of online tools applications in teaching, learning processes, particularly studies on language learning which apply ideas from incidental learning to explain the true nature of learning that takes place in the studies, and to clarify the reasons for such learning patterns and behaviours (see Chun, & Plass, 1996; Akbulut, 2007; Shahrokni, 2009). The above mentioned researchers have investigated the use of vocabulary learning using multimedia/hypermedia. Incidental learning in education contributes to unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities, regardless of whether those activities are academic or non-academic (Kerka, 2000).

Incidental learning is specifically effective when using a computer (Pennington, 1989) and it usually takes place in the process of completion tasks using computers (Cahoon, 1995) or in the online environment (McFerrin, 1999) through observation, repetition, social interaction, and problem solving (Rogers, 1997). Holzinger, et.al., (2001) imply that incidental learning, from the perspective of computing, technology and education, would then include concepts and notions that Ross-Gordon and Dowling (1995) have promulgated earlier: “learning from mistakes, learning by doing, learning through networking, and learning from a series of interpersonal experiments”. Similarly, Herrmann, et.al., (2000) state that the amalgamation of education and technology affects “either intentionally or unintentionally what happens: sometimes for better, sometimes for worse”.

These studies indicated the fact that when computer technologies are used for educational purposes, teachers should be aware of the unintended learning outcomes that may have positive or negative impacts, or both, on students. Northcote and Kendle (2001) postulate that participating in online learning activities such as discussing in online forums and searching for information online may give students the opportunity to acquire many practical online skills in a more incidental, informal manner. Some of these skills that would be useful for language learners are critical analysis of resources, effective online communication, and filtering and deciphering information. In order to attain the above skills, Roth (2009) suggests that technology

should be made a “significant component in the curriculum by drawing on Plato's goals for education and adapting and whereby there ought to exist (1) mutual engagement of individuals in actions where meanings are negotiated; (2) negotiation of a joint enterprise that reflects mutual engagement, active participation and mutual accountability; and (3) a shared repertoire that includes routines, words, stories, gestures, genres, and actions, among others”. In a Facebook community, these three elements are practiced by individuals to engage with others. For instance, in the shared repertoire, Facebook users share their daily routines and stories in their respective Facebook community, and these become the community's property that is further conversed on and dissected by others.

The Horizon Project pointed out that the educational possibilities of using Facebook is a modern topic that has been pointed out by many who were trying to determine the current and new trends to develop teaching and learning processes. The report also noted the usability of these applications in 2005 (Johnson & Smith, 2005) Where the discussion was revised in a report of subsequent years (Johnson, et.al., 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). In the 2007 Horizon Report, the writer indicated that, “the fact that so many students want these interactions and seek them out is a strong indication that we need to be very interested in them as well” (Johnson, et.al., 2007).

Again (Johnson, et.al., 2007) addressed social networking and emphasized “the gap between students’ perceptions of technology and that of faculty continues to widen”. Researchers have discovered that the use of social networking technology greatly supports applications to provide benefit to education. In the (Johnson, et.al., 2009) pointed that the communication beyond the classrooms is necessary and has become possible with the presence of mobile phones that fully supported by social networking systems in addition to a personal network that allows students to communicate and access information

Research and anecdotal evidence have disclosed both positive and negative impacts from the use of the Facebook on learning. The positive impacts encompass learner’s motivation and engagement (Mills, 2009; Northcote,& Kendle, 2001); strengthening of students' social networking practices (Madge,et.al., 2009) and post-hoc critiquing of learning experiences and events (Selwyn, 2009). On the other hand, the negative impacts include wasting or overspending time (Fodeman, &

Monroe, 2009); encouraging negative attitudes (such as lying) and affecting students' social growth detrimentally (Queirolo, 2009). Due to this mixed impact of the Facebook, there is an ongoing debate among researchers and academics as to whether the Facebook should be taken seriously as a learning tool or a learning environment, especially in higher institutions. Many institutions of learning have embarked on the effort to reach out to students using social networking platforms and “spread the word about educational opportunities and programs, and promote achievements on campus” (Violino, 2009).

The use of social networks is a modern phenomenon and has become very popular. Researchers began to investigate and detect the appropriate educational applications. Huang et.al.,(2008) found the relationship between students' learning and their preferences towards using Web 2.0. A study of about 84 students called for a distinct teaching method such as concrete sequence. While Huang, et.al., (2008) stated caution to be taken in interpreting the results because of the size of the sample. the study also stressed that the integration of technology such as social networks may not be suitable for all learners and some of them do not find it suitable as an educational tool. It may be better to follow the educational curriculum in addition to some modern technology tools.

Many studies have emphasized the development of social presence through the application of social networking tools in the teaching of learning processes. For example, DeSchryver, et.al., (2009) compare the use of Moodle forums in terms of availability of student interactions and the length of discussion posts and visualize social presence and the usage of discussion groups on Facebook among users.

In their study, DeSchryver, et. al., (2009) randomly assigned “students in sections of an online course to groups that would use either Moodle forums or Facebook discussion groups for all online discussion activities in the course. The study found no statistical difference between the Moodle and Facebook groups on measures of student-student interaction and length of each posting. In the comparison of social practice measurements, the study found that there are no significant differences between the Moodle groups and Facebook on the overall social presence survey”.

Also, this study showed that there is a significant difference between the two items, where the analysis of the study revealed some students' strong approval on the next sentence "Online or web-based education is an excellent environment for social interaction" and the second item focuses on students' feelings about the internet community.

The results of this study mentioned that the study environments need to arrangement to give good results. The learning system is technically used for all courses on the Internet with a note of difference only in the discussion tools. As one of the studies indicated that "may have divided the students' online attention too much" and also that "many of the Facebook 'cues' that might have otherwise driven students back to the discussion, or made them feel more of a sense of social presences, were not available".

Research Methods

Participants of the Study

The study was conducted at Al-Anbar University in Iraq. The participants were about one hundred and twenty students were selected randomly to participate in the study. Out of the 120 participants, 90 students were at first grade of their Bachelor program, 24 students were at second grade, and 6 students were at third grade. the age of the participants was between nineteen to twenty five and the numbers of the females were (80) and the males were (100).

The study was administered by distributing the questionnaire to the participants. The study's questioner requested basic demographic data of the students which include their academic status and level. It also contained items related to the frequency of use of Facebook while communicating with friends, family, other students, and instructors. Because of the perceptions of the participants and the preferences related to many aspects of social networking systems in academic environments, the Likert-scale was used in the study. Participants were asked to describe the expected problems, benefits and concerns of using Facebook in English language courses by using open ended items

The study sought to obtain information related to the development of academic activities in the future through the use of social networking systems. The study used the SPSS program for statistical analysis. The items of the questionnaire are related to the frequency of the use of Facebook in communication with various social groups and that have relevance in the detection of the degree of the use of the University of Anbar students who currently have social networking systems for the English language and personal communication.

Three paragraphs were used in the questionnaire to show the value and importance of Facebook and assess the perceptions of students. One item related to the perceptions of students and preferences and others related to the classification of students for the possibility of their participation in various activities and responses to the paragraphs of the open ended items. Through the open ended items were revealed the expected barriers, problems and benefits of Facebook in learning English language.

Data Collection

Instruments

The questionnaire is the tool used in this study, which contains two parts, the first one reveals the demographic information of the students and their language usage. The second part includes elements that reveal the activities used by students on Facebook as well as learning the language in the environment of Facebook.

Results of the Study

With regard to the use of the Facebook as a social network, a large majority of respondents (73.6%) indicated that they used the Facebook either every day, or many times in a day. Only two participants stated that they have never used the Facebook at all.

Table 1: The percentage of using Facebook for participants

Frequency of students' Facebook usage	(N=120) <i>F</i>	%
Every day	26	21.8%
On weekly basis	3	1.8%
On monthly basis	3	1.8%
Many times in a day	86	73.6%
Never use Facebook	2	0.9%

As indicated in the Table below, students' Facebook communication with their friends is the most common type of communication activity among them, followed by their communication with family members. Most of the respondents about (85.5%) indicated that they had never used the Facebook to communicate with their teachers, though most of them about (87.3%) used the Facebook to communicate with other students about their subjects materials.

Table 2: Frequency of students' communication using Facebook.

Students' communication.	N	Never	Very little	Sometimes	Frequently
Using Facebook to communicate with teachers	120	85.5%	11.8%	2.7%	0%
Communicating with family in Facebook	120	5.5%	22.7%	52.7%	19.1%
Communicating with other students in the class rooms	120	5.5%	22.7%	52.7%	23.6%
Using Facebook to communicate with friends	120	9.0%	0.0%	11.8%	87.3%

The data indicating the possibilities of students participating in various academic activities by using the Facebook, showed that students are most likely to use Facebook in communicating with their fellow students in the class. In general, the majority of the students are likely to participate in most activities suggested. However, ratings of the possibilities of students' participation are lowest for using Facebook to communicate with their teachers and using online discussions tools that included both teachers and students. The highest ratings are in response to students' effort in accessing course notes and other reading materials, in addition to viewing course schedule, joining students Facebook group in the school and finally communicating with other students in their courses.

Table 3: Frequency of responses to the Possibilities of students' participation in English language related Facebook activities

	N	I would not participate	I might participate	I would likely participate	I would definitely participate
Accessing course notes and other materials through Facebook	120	6.4%	37.3%	38.2%	18.2%
Using Facebook to view course schedule	120	0.9%	16.4%	35.5%	47.3%
Learning vocabulary through Facebook	120	3.6%	10%	41.8%	44.5%
Using Facebook to communicate with other students in English related courses	120	1.8%	20%	32.7%	45.5%
Using Facebook to discuss with both teachers and students on English matters	120	3.7%	32.1%	45%	19.3%

Using Facebook to discuss with other students only	120	2.7%	18.2%	54.5%	24.5%
Using Facebook quizzes that are related to the English courses	120	13.6%	20%	36.4%	30%
Using Facebook games that related to English course material	120	10.9%	22.7%	33.6%	32.7%
Joining Facebook English groups with other students	120	0.9%	3.6%	40%	55.5%

The whole students participated in the study responded favorably towards the level at which the Facebook could be used as a tool for English learning, with the greatest benefit coming in the form of increased communication among students themselves.

Table 4: Average ratings of students' opinions on using Facebook for learning English language.
(1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree)

(1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree)	N	Mean	S	Mode
I think Facebook can be useful in my English courses	120	2.8	.56	3
I think Facebook can improve English communication between students and teachers	120	3.1	.55	3
I think Facebook can improve English communication among students.	120	3.5	.57	3
I think Facebook cannot be used in facilitating English communication skill among EFL students.	120	3.1	.78	3
I would prefer that the use of Facebook in my English learning is discouraging.	120	2.8	.90	2

I do not want to use Facebook in any of my English courses	120	2.1	.73	2
I think Facebook would be a means for learning English among non English speaking students.	120	2.7	.85	2
I would create a separate account in Facebook for use in my English lesson.	120	3.1	.56	3

Questions regarding the uses of the Facebook as a tool for learning English among higher education students were scored on a 4-point Likert Scale from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (4). Most participants thought the Facebook would be useful in their English courses ($M=2.8$, $s=.56$), and could specifically improve English communication among students ($M=3.50$, $s= 0.57$) and between students and their teachers ($M=3.1$, $s= 0.78$). Students participated in the study did not have a strong preference for using the Facebook in facilitating English communication skill among EFL students ($M=3.01$, $s= 0.78$). The respondents also did not have the strong agreement with the item says that the use of the Facebook in English courses would be discouraging ($M=2.8$, $s= 0.90$).

Generally, the open ended questions indicated that participants were largely in favor of the possible use of the Facebook as a means for learning English among higher education students. The major objections from the participants came in two areas, distractions and privacy. About Fifty seven students of the participants made comments indicating that the Facebook would possibly be a distraction. One respondent felt that, “it would be too difficult to study while I could be talking with my friends”. Another wrote, “I use the Facebook as an escape from school activities.”

With regard to the open ended questions, virtually all of the 120 students participated, (99) had both positive and negative responses for using the Facebook in the classroom. The Positive responses were grouped into two categories, convenience and increased communication between students. Most participants (68) felt that the communication skill between students is the largest benefit. As one participant described, “if I have problem about an assignment, I could write to a classmate for clarification”. Another student stated, “It would be more interactive than any other

social network and you could discuss things easier.” Similarly, 27 participants identified the convenience of using the Facebook as a means of learning the English language among students. One respondent noted, “I am usually on Facebook anyway so if my English lesson is on there, it would be easier for me to focus on the school work.” Additionally, thirteen students out of the participants perceived that tools, such as games, quizzes and flashcards are possibly beneficial for learning English. Other comments included the feelings that the layout is more easily manageable than a typical course program of the negative views, the most common response dealt with some sort of distraction. “It may be a huge distraction because there is so much more that Facebook is used for than just school.” The second largest negative response dealt with issues of privacy, both among students and their teachers. “I don’t think I would like teachers to see my Facebook. I think your personal life should not be a teacher’s problem. Some teachers could judge from what they see on your Facebook.”

Discussion

The results collected in the study support the use of Facebook by respondents in English language lessons. The study also noted other responses to some activities that are more likely than others to be evaluated by students.

The Using of Facebook for English classes:

There are several cases of Facebook usage where a small number of participants reporting that they use Facebook on school assignments. Some cases show the forcing separation between school and social life, others show the fact that social networks are not a common tool for school work. The using of Facebook to communicate with families and friends is more than with colleagues, as the scarcity of use to communicate with teachers. Facebook is a social network and students must separate between school and social life because the use of academic Facebook has not been established as a joint use even within academic institutions.

English Lessons and Perceived Value of Facebook:

Many students have found the potential benefits of using Facebook in their courses although a few of them use Facebook for academic purposes. When students were asked to assess the probabilities they would participate in social networking systems in all cases the majority of respondents said they would “like to participate”. Most of the benefits were related to the convenience and ease of communication through the Facebook. An additional insight provided by the narrative responses of the study on the perceptions of English language students to use Facebook as a learning tool.

One participant expressed his strong desire to separate school work and social activity by saying that “I would not like to mix school work and leisure activity.” Increasing the means of communication between students in their classes is one of the perceived benefits of the students as indicated by one of the respondents “Facebook is an easy way to communicate and make connections with people and classmates, especially when you don’t know them well enough to the extent that you can give them a call” in addition to the ease and convenience of communication.

Using Facebook for English Learning and Perceived Problems:

Despite the benefits of using Facebook, there are also many problems and disadvantages of using it in learning English. the study observed through respondents on communication and increased concern about privacy, as one student wrote “I think it is better to separate your personal life from your academic life, namely personal information about you that can be seen by stranger. Moreover, one specific area of concern to many students is the possibility of the school being able to see students’ profiles and other information intended for a more private audience like family and friends”. As one of the student stated, “Teachers could talk to people who could be your next relatives and what is done on the Facebook could hinder things”.

A number of students also said that they would not feel comfortable sharing information with the other public and the Facebook is used for their own expressions. It is necessary to create a

separate account that is used only for the school work. This requires a different password. Another problem for Facebook is distraction for English students. Although there were such negative comments, only 57 out of 110 responded. Where the problem of distraction linked to the results of Karpinski and Duberstein (2009), which that indicated the existence of an inverse relationship between the uses of Facebook and each of the achievement and study time spent in the study. Therefore, caution should be exercised in implementing any educational approach that uses Facebook based on the students' perceptions. Despite the great concerns, there is great potential to use Facebook as an educational tool.

Conclusions

The study concluded that Facebook is a new learning tool in the social networking environment on the Internet. Where it is still unknown and students can accept the possible uses of Facebook. Facebook has advantages and disadvantages that we must disclose before we use it as a teaching tool for our students.

This study has attempted to prove that the use of Facebook has helped students to develop their language competence when compared to traditional teaching instruction or paper-based strategies or activities. In addition Facebook is effective in enhancing students' autonomy and motivation. Consequently, this study should be seen as further evidence to the idea that students should be provided an array of strategies or instructions. Thus giving the opportunity for students to choose the most effective instruction, rather than limiting them to the strategies or instructions that are thought practicable for all without considering the individual differences.

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