

Exploring Academic Use of Online Social Networking Sites (SNS) for Language Learning: Japanese Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Facebook

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Abstract

Social networking sites (SNS) have become an integral part of modern society. Among online social networks, Facebook is considered as one of the most popular platforms for online social networking among millions of users including students of all ages. This paper attempts to evaluate whether Japanese students consider Social networking site Facebook as effective online language-learning platform and whether this social learning approach provide students with the opportunity to voluntarily learn English as a second language and gain experiences that help them to better communicate with foreigners using English. A survey was carried out with 88 undergraduates, postgraduate and research students at University of Toyama, Japan to observe learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the usefulness of Facebook for online language learning. Data collected with the use of structured questionnaire from randomly selected students. Most of candidates agreed that Facebook offer great promises to facilitate them learn English and to improve their motivation as well as confidence level in peer- to- peer communication using English. The result of the survey demonstrated that students believed that Facebook could be used as an effective online platform for English learning and related online educational discussions. In conclusion, Facebook may serve as a meaningful and promising teaching tool which can be used not only by English language instructors but also by other educators for fostering quality in online education.

Keywords: Social networking technology; Facebook; Education; Language learning platform

Introduction

Over the past several years, exchanging information through electronic discussion forums such as radio, wire, electromagnetic, photo-optical or photo-electronic facilities were the earliest known forms of digital democracy which now reflect the ideas behind second generation of world wide web (Web 2.0) developments and designs [1,2]. Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking sites (Facebook), social book marking, wikis (Wikipedia, Seedwiki), YouTube, micro blogging (Twitter), and podcasts are simple and effective second generation of World Wide Web services [3]. Among Web 2.0 applications, Social media and networking technologies have completely transformed the way people interact, work, learn or communicate with each other both at professional and personal level. These online social networking sites are used not only for sending or receiving messages and sharing information, but also providing a social and participatory virtual platform for users in virtual organizations and teams to build and expand social networks for communicating, interacting, collaborating and strengthening cooperation with different stakeholders across geographical boundaries using multiple modalities such as pictures, video, simple writing, voice or video chat and link sharing etc. [4-9].

Founded by Mark Elliot Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook is one of the largest and most popular social networking platforms in existence. This social networking site (SNS) was originally designed for Harvard university students and was limited to those with a university email account. The popularity of this social networking site increased rapidly, and in 2006, it was subsequently opened up to everyone over the age of 13 with a valid email account [10]. During the past 13 years, it has grown to become the most famous and free social networking sites, with more than 1.71 billion active users worldwide [11]. In general, Facebook users may use this site to create virtual connections for building new relation with peoples with common interests, form groups for interacting or keeping in touch with people they already know offline, and expanding interpersonal social relations online, publishing snapshots, personal

opinions and views, videos or live streaming [12-14]. Because of these features, there has been an increasing interest within student community in using social networking platforms, as an effective tool for educational purposes [15-21].

Social networking sites have been utilized in learning and education field due to the simple website's accessibility, efficiency and ease of use, individual affordances and engagement [22,23]. These online social networks permit students to discuss and share their educational knowledge, encourage them to ask for the help of other students, increase their participation in online communication and encourage them to interact for active learning [24]. Over the past few years, the use of Facebook has grown exponentially, especially among the younger population and students continue to be the core user of Facebook [25-29].

Given the fact that social media (particularly Facebook) enables its users to present themselves in an online profile and provide an easy way access and interact with bilingual or multilingual speakers or native speakers of a language of interest. Therefore, online social

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networking platforms can play a significant role in learning and teaching of a foreign language [30-32]. It has been reported that over 80% of undergraduate students are regularly using social networking sites (particularly Facebook) and this is most likely to have increased in recent years [33]. For educational purposes, students frequently use this social networking site for learning and collaboration purposes in an informal mode.

While there has been some focus in published reports on the exploration of social networking sites (Facebook) by students for educational purpose, there have been few research reports on empirical studies related to the impact of Facebook on language learning and student's attitude. Besides technical features, one of the most vital factors in selecting an appropriate social media network for educational use is the familiarity and popularity of that social media platform among students. Facebook possess a larger number of desirable characteristics and qualities desired for educational technologies. For instance, it offers opportunities to give and receive constructive peer-to-peer feedback in a community which matches the social context of teaching and learning in a collaborative venture e.g. school, college, university etc. In this study, we used Facebook as online SNS. The main reason to choose this social networking platform is the great popularity of Facebook among the graduate school students participating in this study, its huge influence on students, and amount of time they spend on it [34]. The objective of this research was to carry out an empirical study primarily designed to quantitatively explore how Japanese students view the potential of SNS (particularly Facebook) as educational tool to support their English language learning in Japanese context, and to explore the relationship between frequency of Facebook use as a learning aid, student attitude, perception, engagement and participation in Facebook activities. This study may help language schools and teachers for using Facebook as a potential and innovative educational tool for language teaching and learning strategies.

Methods

Sample and instrument

The study was carried out in the University of Toyama Japan. The study included, 88 undergraduate and post graduate students (25 females and 63 male). For the purposes of this study, a survey questionnaire comprising 7 questions was prepared, some questions were modified from secondary resources and some were compiled by the researcher [31]. Around 200 questionnaires were distributed among students. However, only 88 students returned the fully answered questionnaire which were used for data analysis. Participants were randomly selected to take part in the survey using convenience sampling technique where the students were selected based on researchers' convenient accessibility and proximity to the students [35]. Our laboratory students and students who visited the university's library (from different departments) were approached and provided the questionnaire, which was promptly returned soon after completion. The collected data is not representative for the whole university students, but this finding can be useful for future SNS based educational studies in Japan.

The questionnaire was divided into of three main parts. The first part of the study solicited demographic characteristics of the randomly selected respondents. The demographic data collected was based on students' age, gender, contact address and their language writing and speaking abilities. The second part of the study comprised of items asking information on the length of membership (e.g. 0-1 years, 1-2 years, 3-4 years or more than 4 years) and frequency of Facebook usage (e.g. daily (1-3 times) daily (4-6 times) daily (7-9 times), or whenever get time each day or not daily). The third part of the study included

students' attitude and perceptions towards FB usage. The questionnaire used in this study employed a 5-point Likert type scaling with strongly agree and strongly disagree options.

Data analysis and results

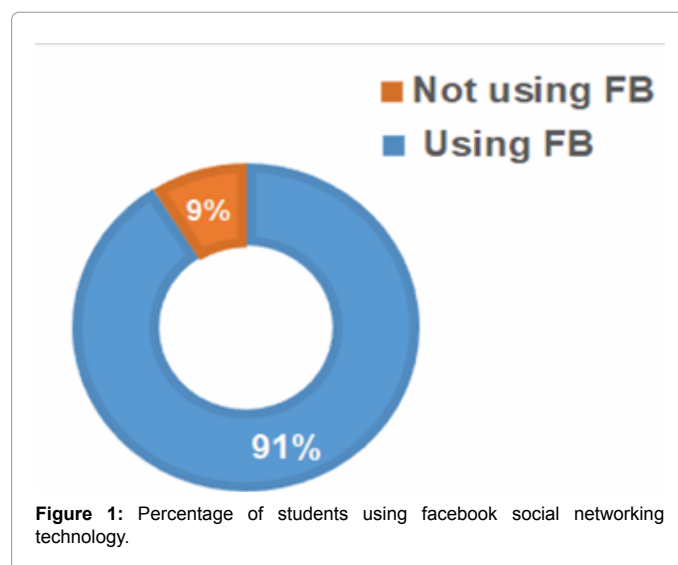
Quantitative analysis was carried out to analyze students' demographic characteristics, their FB account login activity, perceptions and attitudes toward Facebook usage for educational purposes. Quantitative data such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages were calculated and analyzed to assess students' view on Facebook as educational tool for English learning. The biggest advantage of carrying out research analysis using questionnaire tests is that it is an economical way of accumulating information, relatively a large amounts of data can be gathered from a large number of respondents in a very short period, information can be gathered in a complete standardized manner, it can be used for asking sensitive questions which respondents may feel uneasy answering to an interviewer, and it provides the confidentiality of data and anonymity of respondents because respondents can use enough time to think about their answers.

Demographic data

Figure 1 shows the socio demographic characters of the participants. Eighty-eight students from University of Toyama were included in the study. The participants were predominantly engineering students. Out of 88 investigated candidates, 28.4% were female and 71.5% of them were male. Their ages ranged between 18 and 30. The highest numbers of the participants were 19-26 years old. As far their English language ability is concerned, 90% of the participating students had a working knowledge to good command of English language.

Facebook popularity and usage frequency

The first question of the survey was meant to corroborate that each student indeed has a personal account on Facebook. While collecting the opinions of students who participated in the survey regarding the popularity of social networks, it was found that Facebook is the most popular and favorite social media platform among majority of participants. Results shown in Figure 2 reveal that out of 88 students who participated in the survey 91% have Facebook user account while only 9% don't not have Facebook profile. Most of the participants having Facebook registered account stated that they joined Facebook during the last few years (34.69% joined Facebook in the last 1 year, 14.28%



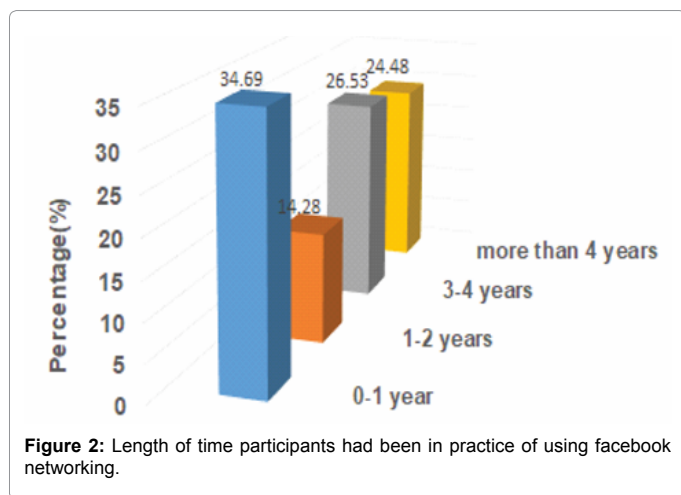


Figure 2: Length of time participants had been in practice of using facebook networking.

joined FB for more than two years, 26.53% joined FB for more than three years and 24.48% joined FB for more than four years). Majority of the participants were acquainted with various common features of Facebook (to create a profile, to upload and share photo and videos, to find and add contacts, to comment on other users' walls, online chat, play online game and make audio or video call). As most of the features of Facebook are originally designed in English language, its users need to have sufficient knowledge of English in order to make maximum use of this platform for educational purposes such as language learning. Facebook users in Japan do not prefer to use English for creating their Facebook profile. A large number of students frequently use Japanese (the national language of Japan), English and a mix of English and Japanese to interact and communicate with their friends on Facebook social networking website. The frequency of Facebook usage by students participated in this study (daily or weekly) is shown in Figure 3. The data indicated that most of the students who participated in this study are active users of Facebook. If the participants use English for their Facebook interactions in order to develop their English-language proficiency, this high login frequency and login consistency indeed represent their frequent communication dynamics using English

Students View Towards Facebook as an Online English Language Learning/Practicing Platform

As mentioned above, all data's were collected through a questionnaire survey in order to examine the variation in the attitude and perception of the participants toward Facebook as an online English language learning platform. Respondents were asked the following questions: How often they use Facebook? How much time they spend on Facebook per day? How many friends do they have on Facebook? More importantly, respondents were asked to provide their view, opinion and experience towards usefulness of Facebook for educational usage to learn English language skills, to enhance confidence and motivation level for communication. A considerable number of students responded positively and agreed that Facebook is an astonishingly simple and one of the easiest social networking platform to access and its use often help them to increase their enthusiasm for learning and speaking English with increased confidence at public places or in university campus. The overall results shown in this section indicated the students' view and perception regarding the use of Facebook for English learning and improvement purposes. It was observed that participants were generally agreed or disagreed with statements describing the use of Facebook as an online language learning platform. Agreement or disagreement with these items indicated in Figure 4.

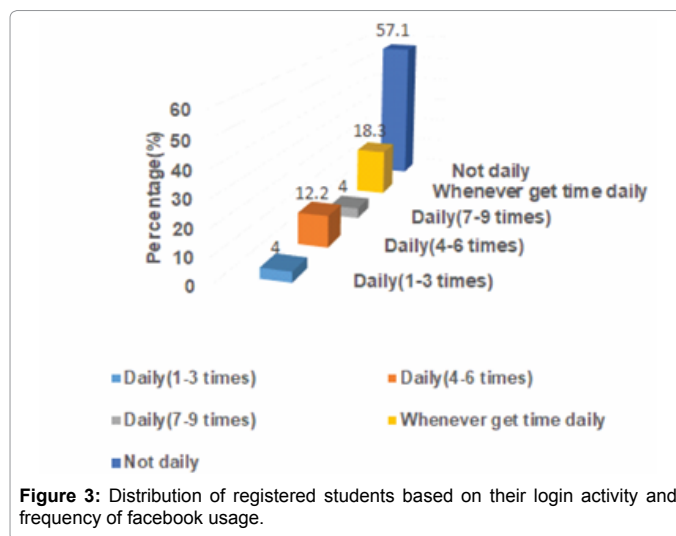


Figure 3: Distribution of registered students based on their login activity and frequency of facebook usage.

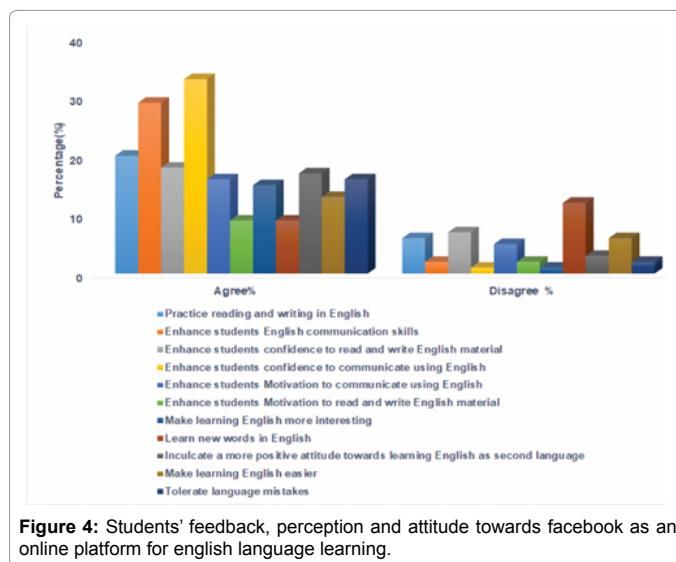


Figure 4: Students' feedback, perception and attitude towards facebook as an online platform for english language learning.

Improvement of student's motivation and confidence level to practice English using Facebook

Regarding university students view on influence of Facebook in improving motivation and confidence level to practice English, 20% students replied that Facebook helps them to improve vocabulary acquisition and provide the opportunity to practice and increase English language reading/writing skills, 30% replied that Facebook provide opportunity to improve their English communication skills, while 32 % replied that Facebook provide opportunity to enhance their confidence (Figure 4). It is evident that by performing the Facebook activities such as exchanging inbox messages, sharing experiences and views, and posting in their Facebook wall, interacting with friends in real time with Facebook Live streaming greatly help the users to build motivation as well as confidence level in reading, writing and oral communication in English. The findings indicated that various features Facebook can be used as effective tools for language conversation practice and improvement.

Results and Discussion

The intensive application of internet communication technologies for educational purposes can be regarded as one of the greatest

revolutions that occurred in the global higher education sector over the past few years [20,26,28]. The advent of smart phones and the evolution of social networking sites like Facebook with innumerable features has brought significant changes in the information and communication flow patterns. Now a day, SNS system is considered as one of the most efficient methods in channeling most of the latest updates worldwide. The popularity of social networking sites has rapidly increased among students of all ages. These networks provide online platform that encourage students to build virtual lives, to make social relationships with others who share similar activities, interests, backgrounds [36,37]. The extensive popularity of the social networks among youth in general and an increasing use of SNS by student in particular has resulted in the increasing demand for integrating and implementing SNS technology into teaching and learning activities that can be adapted and used for modernizing the educational system as per students' learning styles [6,15,38-41]. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to identify underlying types of social media usage and to investigate the dynamic trend of student opinion and attitude on use of social network sites in academic activities (e.g., English language learning). In this study, an empirical study is carried out to examine how Japanese students consider the potential of social media (especially Facebook) as meaningful online language-learning platform and whether this learning environment can help them in learning English as a second language. Toward this end, we qualitatively analyzed data collected with the use of structured questionnaire from randomly selected engineering, medical and science students. Over the past 3-4 years, most of the Japanese companies and other workplaces prefer to hire graduates with bilingual or multilingual capabilities. The employers often look for graduates with excellent Japanese as well as English skills. Due to this reason this preliminary empirical study is carried out in order evaluate whether or not Facebook media has any influence on the Japanese students' English learning (reading, writing and communication) skills. Our findings pointed out several crucial information for the understanding the prospective and attitude of Japanese students toward the use of Facebook for learning English and acquiring new vocabulary.

In this study, a positive correlation between frequency of Facebook usage as learning aid and improvement of Japanese students' motivation and confidence level in English language is established. For example, the results shown in Figures 2-4 clearly suggest that students develop more positive attitudes toward using Facebook as useful tool for English language learning and many students agreed or strongly agreed that Facebook facilitated them in familiarizing with the usage of English language as well as acquiring new vocabulary and practicing reading/writing and communication skills. The obtained results could be helpful for us to carry out further research to study Facebook connections in structural models and investigating Facebook educational usage i.e., to educate non English speaking volunteers in general and Japanese students in particular (to teach English) using SNS system.

Conclusion

Overall, this study provides insights into attitudes and perceptions of Japanese students' toward learning English language through engaging in Facebook activities. Preliminary evidence suggest that Japan-based university students use Facebook as a potential platform to learn and improve their English language reading, writing skills, and to enhance motivation and confidence level for oral communication using English. The results obtained in this study demonstrate that social networking media in general and Facebook in particular can be beneficial for English learning as a second language due its ubiquitous popularity and free options for creating virtual online study groups,

expressing and sharing academically-related ideas, and promoting teaching and learning through active interactions among educators and students. Importantly, Facebook can be a useful tool for students who may be experiencing complications in language leaning studies or may not be performing well in relevant subjects and such candidates can use social networking to receive educational support from their acquaintances. In addition, educators or mentors can also possibly use Facebook to connect with their students who are underperforming in their subject in order to provide them educational support or conduct online remedial classes via Facebook live streaming. Therefore, our preliminary results may be useful for English language educators, or instructors to use Facebook for creating more meaningful language learning environment outside the classroom and to develop efficient strategies for the incorporation Facebook into and across higher education pedagogy.

Declaration of Conflict Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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