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EAP COURSE STUDENTS' INITIAL PERCEPTIONS OF A FACEBOOK GROUP AS A SUPPLEMENTARY TOOL OF EFL EDUCATION: A PILOT RESEARCH

Abstract. Nowadays Facebook belongs to the everyday reality of most university students. The paper approaches this social networking site from an educational perspective. Thus, the goal of the pilot research is to study EAP students' perceptions towards Facebook as an educational tool and their initial perceptions of using this social network in an EFL course. A small-scale (N=29), questionnaire-based qualitative survey was conducted in order to achieve the study objective. The findings are arranged to three categories: students' use of Facebook in general; students' use of Facebook for educational purposes; students' initial perceptions of Facebook group as an extension of the EAP course.

Keywords: Facebook, EFL education, student, perception, qualitative questionnaire, pilot research.

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СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ СЕТЬ «ФЕЙСБУК» КАК ДОПОЛНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ИНСТРУМЕНТ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ КАК ИНОСТРАННОМУ (АНКЕТИРОВАНИЕ СТУДЕНТОВ ВУЗА)

Аннотация. В настоящее время социальная сеть «Фейсбук» прочно вошла в жизнь студентов вузов. В статье данный феномен рассматривается с точки зрения его обучающего потенциала. Цель проведенного исследования – выявить отношение студентов к «Фейсбук» как инструменту образования и их ожидания от использования данной социальной сети с целью изучения английского языка как иностранного. Для достижения поставленной цели было проведено маломасштабное анкетирование (29 студентов), результаты которого представлены в трех категориях: использование «Фейсбук» в целом; использование «Фейсбук» в образовательных целях; использование «Фейсбук» как дополнительного инструмента изучения курса английского языка для академических целей.

Ключевые слова: Фейсбук, обучение английскому языку как иностранному, студент вуза, восприятие, качественная анкета, начальное исследование.

Introduction

The rising popularity and importance of social networking sites (especially Facebook) were not unnoticed by researchers of language pedagogy. However, the question whether to disrupt students' personal space on social networks with foreign language education remains without a definite answer, since the studies dealing with social networking in EFL teaching and learning offer

mixed results. It seems that positives prevail over negatives; however, Aydin notes that still only “ [...] limited number of studies have indicated that Facebook has positive effects on [...] EFL learning” [3, p. 157]. The available research is often based on foreign language learners’ and teachers’ subjective theories (beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, etc.) as reconstructed in questionnaires or interviews. Our pilot research aimed at university students’ initial perceptions of Facebook as a tool of EFL education represents no exception in this aspect. Its role in our main research is to illuminate the findings of the dissertation thesis literature review (and suggest other relevant topics).

1. Methodology of the pilot research

In order to get a better insight into the topic of social networks in education and in foreign language education, we conducted a small-scale pilot research based on the questionnaire method. The questionnaire survey was designed to investigate university students’ perceptions of using Facebook for academic purposes and their initial perceptions towards the use of this social network in an EAP course.

The research sample involved twenty-nine undergraduate students (ranging from freshmen to juniors) from the Faculty of Education at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. The sample included teacher trainees from various fields (such as physical education, musical art, Slovak, Hungarian, or Russian language and literature, biology, chemistry, etc.) who were during the 2014/2015 winter semester enrolled in the English for academic purposes course offered by the Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies and its Facebook group extension designed by the author. All of the participants (N=29) joined the EAP course Facebook group created by the researcher.

After completing the first Facebook homework assignment (picture dictionaries), teacher’s first upload of the course information (rules of the Facebook study group) and study materials (hyperlinked vocabulary list and a worksheet), and the first extra activity (an exchange of views on tablet use in formal primary education in the form of a Facebook discussion), the participants’ perceptions of utilising Facebook for formal educational purposes and towards the EAP course Facebook group were inspected using a questionnaire with predominantly open question items (except for the queries on general Facebook-related information). We decided to conduct the instrumentation after giving the students an initial idea of how the coursework in this social networking environment could look like. The analysis of the qualitative responses was based on data categorisation and coding, as described by Cohen et al. [4].

2. Results of the pilot research

The results can be grouped into three wider categories, in our case labelled as i.) *Students' use of Facebook in general*, ii.) *Students' use of Facebook for educational purposes*, and iii.) *Students' initial perceptions of Facebook group as an extension of the EAP course*. We confront our outcomes with the findings of relevant research wherever possible.

i.) Students' use of Facebook in general

There was no student enrolled in the EAP course (N=29) without a Facebook account. Similarly, however on a significantly larger scale, Jones et al. or Roblyer et al. found that a vast majority of their research participants (also undergraduate university students) had a Facebook account [8; 17]. Twenty-five of our participants (86%) reported to use this social utility on a daily basis, and the remaining four respondents (14%) stated vaguely “almost every day”. Furthermore, all of them admitted to be “active” or “online” (in terms of following friends' updates or posts, checking personal updates, posting content, chatting with friends, etc..) multiple times in the days when they use Facebook. Based on their responses, it seems that teachers can expect most of the students to have an active Facebook account that they usually access multiple times a day. This unprecedented “student availability” could be considered as an improvement in education generally. However, a minority of authors are careful in over-valuing social networks in educational reality simply for this reason [13; 5], and there exists also scientific evidence that supports distraction aspect of social networking sites in learning [11] and negative impact of time spent social networking on academic performance [15; 16].

ii.) Students' use of Facebook for educational purposes

Jong et al. reported that (81%) of the research subjects (N=261) experienced educational usage of Facebook, and (59%) wanted to use it for academic purposes [9]. The EAP students' responses regarding their previous experiences with Facebook as an educational instrument were nearly in line with the above findings, as all of our respondents had such an experience. In the questionnaire, they identified the following educational uses of Facebook (without having set pre-determined options):

- participation in informal study groups formed and created by students of a particular study programme;
- sharing course material among classmates and access to study materials;
- a source of course information (assignment deadlines, cancelled seminars, etc.);

- peer communication about unfamiliar concepts in the study material and problems with coursework (namely sharing and confrontation of students' opinions in group discussions and asking for help in the study group or using private chat with classmates).

Some of the likely outcomes of using Facebook in education presented by Ophus and Abbitt [14], Irwin et al [7], or Jong et al. [9] were also replicated among our respondents. The participants' educational uses of Facebook (those consistent with the mentioned authors) included sharing and posting study materials, schedule views, and peer communication about educational matters. However, immediacy of feedback was not mentioned in our sample; but on the other hand, participation in student-created informal study groups is lacking in the reviewed literature. We did not inspect if the educational use of Facebook was rare [13; 8; 17] or desired among the students [19; 9], but we assume that students are already using it for academic matters.

iii.) Students' initial perceptions of Facebook group as an extension of the EAP course

From the whole sample of twenty-nine respondents, four did not comment on this category; therefore, we analysed only the answers of the remaining twenty-five university students. From the responses analysed within this category (N=25), eighteen (72%) were positive, four (16%) expressed mixed perceptions, and three (12%) were negative. Further analytic processes revealed more precise codes within the replies. They are discussed below and then summarised again in Table 1.

We start with the influence on motivation. From the twenty-five participants, motivation was mentioned in the responses of eight students. Similarly as the majority of the research participants of Kabilan et al. [10] or Türkmen [20] (university students enrolled in EFL courses), also most of these eight students (namely seven) perceived the course Facebook group element as motivating; in our case, due to extra activities, ability to see others' work, or the novelty aspect. The one remaining student felt that the group activities were not motivating at all; however, this was probably because of her overall negative attitude towards learning English, as she acknowledged. Additionally, Yunus et al. [21] mentioned that audience (i.e. other course Facebook group members) may contribute positively to learners' motivation and engagement in English writing activities; but in case of our pilot research, the one and the same respondent was hesitant to expose her homework assignments to the rest of the group, thus expressing a negative perception of audience.

Like some of the university students surveyed by Ophus and Abbitt [14] or Irwin et al. [7], five of our pilot research participants mentioned the familiar environment of Facebook to access

course info and materials as a potential benefit. These five students valued the easy access to study resources and course information (e.g. test notifications, cancelled seminars, homework assignments, etc.).

Three students felt that when compared to group e-mails, the Facebook group leads to improved communication with the teacher and other classmates. Enhanced communication was identified as benefit for TEFL also by Al-Shehri [1] – enhanced student-teacher interaction outside the classroom, or Yunus et al. [21] – maximised feedback and contact with the teacher.

A positive impact of the course Facebook group on autonomous learning was reported by three of the participants. For example, one of them stated that she checked her classmates' outcomes and revised her EFL output according to them. The potential of social networks for self-directed language learning was described also in the reviewed research, namely in Türkmen [20] – the participants used Edmodo for testing their foreign language skills on their own, and Laire et al. [12] – the learners revised their own and peer-generated content on Storify. These authors concluded that using social networks in language learning may foster autonomous learning.

One of our students noted that the closed EAP course Facebook group put her at ease when using English. This student did not feel to be “under pressure” when producing the target language in the group. This opinion is consistent with the opinions of most of Hsu's research subjects who marked the pressure-free environment of a course Facebook group as a likely outcome for EFL learning [6].

The same student described also how she had managed to complete one of the assignments in the bus on her way home. She perceived it as a huge benefit, since she could consequently focus on other activities at home. This availability of social networks offers an opportunity for a language learner to be exposed to the target language without limitations in space or time, therefore extending the exposure beyond the language classroom, as Averianova adds [2].

A less than one fifth of the participants, namely three out of twenty-five, expressed a negative perception towards using Facebook utility for EFL learning. Besides the already discussed negative implications for motivation, the other two participants stated explicitly that the EAP course group forced them to use Facebook. Before, these two students tended to log in to their Facebook accounts sporadically, but now, they have to use it on a regular basis, as they complained.

The remaining four respondents presented mixed perceptions. According to two of them (who otherwise described the social networking supplement as being useful), a potential difficulty of using Facebook in language classes could be connected with technical aspects, namely a possible absence of everyday Internet access or non-existent Facebook account on the students' side. It means that EFL teachers should not consider learners' ability to access the online space as universally available, as Yunus et al. suggested [21].

Laire et al. [12] claimed that teachers lack didactic skills necessary for implementing social networking sites in the EFL instruction, but one of the participants of our pilot research pointed to a possible absence of skills to use Facebook in EFL learning also on the side of language learners. In connection to this aspect, Said and Tahir commented that an inability to interact successfully with the interface of used technology will affect negatively learner's involvement in the educational process [18].

Finally, one student described the Facebook homework as sometimes time-consuming. However, the data obtained from this participant lacked a more detailed context, and therefore, we could not inspect further in what cases.

Table 1

**Students' initial perceptions of the Facebook group
as a supplementary tool of the EAP course**

Positive perceptions number of students: 18	Mixed perceptions number of students: 4	Negative perceptions number of students: 3
increased motivation - (7x) (e.g. due to extra Facebook activities, ability to see others' work, or the novelty aspect)	possible absence of a Facebook account or everyday Internet access - (2x) (some students can't be online daily or may not have an account)	forced use of Facebook - (2x) (e.g. a student used Facebook sporadically but now has to access the account frequently)
familiar platform to access coursework and course information - (5x) (e.g. easy access to study materials or information about deadlines, cancelled seminars)	possible absence of skills to use Facebook for educational purposes - (1x) (e.g. a student may not know about all of its functions)	no impact on motivation to learn English - (1x) (e.g. for a student who does not like this language)
improved communication with the teacher and among peers - (3x) (e.g. when compared to group e-mails)	Facebook homework can be sometimes time-consuming - (1x)	negative effect of audience - (1x) (e.g. when posting completed homework)
contribution to autonomous learning - (3x) (e.g. revision of output based on peers' postings)	—	—
pressure-free environment for language learning - (1x) (the closed group of classmates puts the student at ease when using English)	—	—
independence from time and space - (1x) (e.g. in terms of completing homework)	—	—

LEGEND: **increased motivation** – a theme created to cover responses that are similar in nature; 4 – the total number of students expressing one of the three groups of perceptions; (2x) – the code was identified in two responses.

Conclusion

Based on our results and the cited research works, university students are usually active on Facebook; i.e., they can be expected to have an active Facebook account that they log in to (almost) daily. The responses and foreign research also suggest that the idea of using Facebook for educational matters is not new among university students but is widely spread within this community. The participants of our pilot research instrumentation (N=29) have already experienced educational usage of Facebook in terms of participating in informal, student-generated/formed study groups, sharing study materials among classmates, or communicating about problematic concepts in the course study material.

Both the cited authors and our respondents expressed a slight preference for positive educational value of Facebook in the tertiary level TEFL, though a certain level of scepticism and criticism is present among them. Most of the research subjects (N=18/25) revealed positive perceptions of the EAP course Facebook group extension. They valued its positive influence on motivation to learn the English language, familiarity of the platform, enhanced teacher-student and peer communication, ability to foster autonomous EFL learning in a pressure-free context, and independence from time and location. Four of the EAP students expressed mixed perceptions towards the Facebook course supplement. They mostly connected the potential pitfalls with the technical perspective (e.g. lack of Internet access or skills to use Facebook in EFL education on the side of the student, etc.), although one of them acknowledged that completing assignments in the Facebook group is sometimes time-consuming. The remaining respondents (N=3/25) showed negative perceptions, as one of them perceived the group as non-motivating and the audience as having negative effects, and the other two complained about frequent and forced use of Facebook.

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