

Sense of Community and English Perceived Learning in a Social Networking Site: A Study of Facebook

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Abstract—The primary purpose of this study was to determine if a relationship exists between sense of community and English perceived learning in the social networking site Facebook. 27 students from multiple nationalities who were members of English learning page participated in this study. The data were obtained via an online questionnaire with three scales. Results indicate that the students have positive feelings about Facebook as a tool for learning English, English perceived learning and sense of community. low correlation exists between sense of community and English perceived learning.

Index terms—Facebook, sense of community, English perceived learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of social networking sites in particular Facebook (FB) leading social network has led researchers to consider the potential of using them in education [1].

Learning a language in the most effective way has always been an important issue for language learners in particular university students. Since an increasing number of university students have turned into keen users of FB who login frequently, it would be interesting to if they are able to improve their English through this new of communication [2]. Godwin-Jones [3] suggests that it would be “logical to leverage the current student generation's heavy reliance“ (p.8) on social networking platforms, like FB, in support of language learning. In this regard, FB provides language learning activities, whereby students can interact and communicate synchronously or asynchronously with native speakers of different languages who share similar interests and have access to an incredible amount of valuable information on a variety of topics [4].

Sense of Community (SOC) is a critical determinant of success in traditional face-to-face communities [5]. It is one of many factors that the improvement and effectiveness of student learning. This factor can play a significant role in teaching and learning process. A number of empirical studies, for example, Chiu [6], have investigated the influence of this important construct in the context of virtual communities.

To date, however, the use of social networking sites like FB in learning a foreign language has been little investigated [7]-[12]. The pedagogical assumptions behind their use have

been called into question [13]. Also few studies have investigated the relationship between SOC and perceived learning in social networking sites [12].

In this study, we examined if learners consider FB as a useful and meaningful learning environment that could facilitate and/or enhance their learning of English. We accomplished this by exploring the level of learners' English perceived learning (EPL) and their SOC, and the relationship between these two constructs.

II. FB AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

For years, theorists have recognized that networked computers can potentially offer a rich environment for socio-cultural language learning [13], [14]. According to Bakar, “e-learning or web-based learning environment is an evolution in education and English language learning” [15]. Ivan [16] suggests that to learn a language, learners can utilize the increasingly innovative resources existing in the social networking sites as the web-based learning environment. Social networking sites can support language acquisition by offering an opportunity to learn through observation before mastering an understanding. This leads to learners' gaining confidence and becoming a recognized member of the community, which then allows them to encourage and enable learning within the community, by being teachers themselves [17]. The user-friendliness of the site, availability of instant (if not quick) feedback, and real time communication are only a few of the benefits of learning a language via a social networking site.

There are always communities of learners eager to learn a foreign language through social networking sites. Foreign language instruction increasingly seeks to foster interaction within a community of learners [18]. FB as one of the leading social networking sites can be used as the key tool of the educational process, especially to learn and to teach foreign languages. Since most of the FB features are in English, one has to understand English in order to participate in the activities and functions provided by FB [19]. FB can be utilized for authentic language interaction, and can be used to increase motivation and improve the performance of English language learners such that learners have the opportunity to connect with the language's native speakers [4]. Through interaction and real practice in English, learners are able to learn faster and consequently improve their language learning skills. Similarly, Godwin-Jones [3] claim that tools and platforms such as FB; “that enhance communication and human interaction can potentially be harnessed for language learning” (p. 7). FB allows learners access to active discussions occurring within the online learning community who can share knowledge

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and help each other with any required corrections. In terms of other language skills, FB has been a platform for students to read and model good writing. Using FB facilitates learners' acquisition of constructive writing skills. Bakar, [20] shows that students who use FB or any e-learning webpage have better reading and writing skills. Through feedback that learners receive, they would be able to make immediate changes if necessary to correct their linguistic skills. Blattner, and Fiori [4] examined how FB can provide opportunities to enhance the "development of socio-pragmatic competence in language learners" and the "sense of community in language classrooms" [4].

III. SOC AND PERCEIVED LEARNING

Despite the existence of a large body of literature on sense of community, there is no universally accepted definition of the term "sense of community" [21]. For example, Sarason [22] defines the characteristics of sense of community as "the perception of similarity to others, and acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence ...a feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure." Unger and Wandesman [23] identify sense of community as "feelings of membership and belongingness and shared socio-emotional ties," and McMillan and Chavis [5] suggest the definition of community 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." These views of community imply the most essential elements of sense of community: mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, trust, interactivity, and shared values and goals [24]. Bielaczyc and Collins [21], [25], [26] concurred, noting that community creates a culture of learning that can promote higher-order learning because it provides the social context in which learning occurs. Recent research has established a clear link between sense of community and perceived learning in online learning environments [21], [26]. Perceived learning measures student' perceptions about their own learning, which is the opposite to actual learning measured by grades, assessments, or test results. Nevertheless, it can be a valid measure of students' learning. Lewis [27] indicated that self-reported learning or perceived learning is the extent to which a certain level of knowledge obtained on a new learning is recognized by students. Ewell, Lovell, Dressler, and Jones [28] pointed out that "there is a considerable literature concerned with establishing the validity of student self-reports about cognitive outcomes" (p. 23). Additionally, Alavi, Marakas, and Yoo [29] define perceived learning as "changes in the learner's perceptions of skill and knowledge levels before and after the learning experience" (p. 406). Arbaugh [30] examined five Internet-based MBA courses and found that students' perceptions of learning were most closely related to the instructor's emphasis on interaction within the course, ease of interaction, and classroom dynamics. Studies demonstrate that students' sense of community influences their perceived cognitive learning [21] and assisted learning if they believe that they belong to the community or group [31]. Once learners see themselves as a

part of group, they feel trust and comfort in the community. Students with feelings of connectedness are willing to involve themselves in group activities such as learning activities.

IV. METHOD

A. Research Design

This study was a cross-sectional survey primarily designed to quantitatively examine the relationship between students' SOC and their EPL in the FB learning environment.

B. Sample

The respondents consisted of 27 Middle Eastern and Asian university students (52% male and 48% female) from multiple countries who were official members of IELTS OFFICIAL, an FB page specifically set up for learning the English language. Their ages ranged between 19 and 54, with those between 19-27 and 28-36 accounting for 81% of the sample. A majority were higher education students from the Middle East who were learning English through FB.

C. Description of IELTS Official

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Official FB page, perhaps one of the largest and most popular pages, to date, with 258,609 members from around the globe is designed to increase the language ability and skills of candidates who want to study, work or migrate overseas. IELTS is recognized by over 7,000 organizations worldwide, including universities, employers, professional bodies, immigration authorities and other government agencies. This page incorporates a range of free interactive online lessons, supported by a community of online native speakers and a range of foreign language learners. Within the page, learners from all over the world continuously communicate and learn from each other, a factor that makes IELTS Official addictive and effective. Through its practical discussions, IELTS Official seeks to provide an environment of total immersion in the language.

D. Instrument

The online instrument used to collect data in this study, adapted from recent research in SOC and perceived learning, consisted of four sections. The first section contained items on respondents' demographic information such as gender, age, and race. The other three sections contained a total of 28 items measuring on students' general perceptions towards the use of FB as an English language learning tool (6 items), EPL in reading, writing, and grammar through FB (13 items adapted from Mahmud and Ching [32], and SOC (9 items developed by Rovai, Wighting, & Liu [33]). The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 being 'Strongly Agree'.

E. Data Collection and Data Analysis

An online survey questionnaire was first created using an account on www.docs.google.com. The online questionnaire was distributed in January 2013 by posting its link in private messages to a number of students. Two weeks were allowed for data collection. The data were analyzed using SPSS

version 20 using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) to describe the respondents' perception towards learning English through FB, the levels of their EPL and SOC. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between SOC and EPL. An independent samples *t-test* was then used to explore gender differences SOC and EPL in the FB environment.

V. RESULTS

A. Research Question 1

What is the perception of students towards using FB as a tool to learn the English language?

In general, students indicated a positive attitude towards using FB as a language learning tool. A large majority indicated a preference for FB in English (74%); and agreed/strongly agreed that FB “makes learning English more interesting” (74%), and “is a useful tool for learning English” (71%). However, 37% disagreed that “FB made them “tolerant to language mistakes”. Agreement to these items ranged from 74 to 71% (Table I).

TABLE I: SURVEY RESULTS FOR ITEMS REFLECTING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS USING FB (IN %)

Question	SD*	D	SLA	A	SA	%
FB makes learning English more interesting	0	0	26	48	26	74
I prefer FB in English	0	0	26	63	11	74
FB is a useful tool for learning English	0	0	30	56	15	71

SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, SLA= Slightly Agree, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

B. Research Question 2

What percentage of EPL and SOC do students in the FB environment report?

Levels of Perceived English Learning

Students indicate a high level of English perceived learning through FB. For example, they agreed/strongly agreed that they; “learn more new words when reading friends' posts in English” (89%), “can use different word forms in English” (81%), and are “more confident with [their] writing ability using FB” (74%). Agreement to these items ranged from 89 to 74% (Table II).

TABLE II: SURVEY RESULTS FOR ITEMS REFLECTING STUDENTS' EPL USING FB (N %)

Question	SD*	D	SLA	A	SA	%
I learn more new words when reading my friends' posts in English	0	0	11	48	41	89
I can use different word forms in English	0	4	15	48	33	81
I am more confident with my writing ability using FB	0	0	26	63	11	74

Levels of Sense of Community:

Overall, the results also indicated a high level of SOC in

FB as a learning environment. For example, students agreed/strongly agreed; they had “plenty of opportunities to learn with others in FB” (74%), felt “connected to others in FB” (74%) and were “confident that others in FB will academically support” them (59%). Agreement to these items ranged from 59% to 74% (Table III).

TABLE III: SURVEY RESULTS FOR ITEMS REFLECTING STUDENTS' SOC IN FB (IN %)

Question	SD*	D	SLA	A	SA	%
I feel that I am given plenty of opportunities to learn with others in this FB page	0	0	26	48	26	74
I feel connected to others in this FB page	0	11	15	63	11	74
I feel confident that others in this FB page will academically support me	0	15	33	48	11	59

SD= Strongly Disagree, D= Disagree, SLA= Slightly Agree, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree

However, the lowest levels of EPL or ranked items' percentage were related to “... improving reading skills from using FB...” (44%) and “... reading related articles to support points of view in the FB discussion...” (52%). In the SOC construct the lowest levels or ranked items' percentage were related to the “... modest English learning in this FB page through FB...” (22%) and “... this FB page does not promote a desire to learn...” (26%).

C. Research Question 3

Is there any significant relationship between students' SOC and their EPL level in the FB as a learning environment?

A comparison was made using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (*r*) on the relationship between SOC and English perceived learning. The result of the comparison indicates a low correlation at the 0.01 level (*r* = 0.36, *N* = 27) (Table IV). It can be concluded that although there was a positive correlation between variables, it was a small relationship. The magnitude of correlation between variables was 0.36 which, according to Guilford's criteria for interpreting strength of relationship between two variables, was a small relationship (Table IV).

TABLE IV: CORRELATIONAL MATRIX FOR PERCEIVED LEARNING AND SATISFACTION

Measure		Sense of Community	English Perceived Learning
Sense of Community	Pearson Correlation	-	0.36**
	Sig.	-	.064
English Perceived Learning	Pearson Correlation	0.36**	-
	Sig.	.064	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

D. Research Question 4

Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female students' perception of SOC and EPL in the FB environment?

The comparison of mean scores using an independent samples *t*-test at the level of significance of 0.05 was carried out for each variable under the section of SOC and EPL.

The Group Statistics labeled table indicate that the mean and standard deviation for each of each groups (male and female).

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Sense	Male	14	27.21	3.190	.852
	Female	13	24.92	3.426	.950
Learning	Male	14	53.28	3.561	.951
	Female	13	46.76	5.464	1.515

TABLE VI: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Differ
Sense	Equal variances assumed	.306	.585	1.79	25	.084	2.291
	Equal variances not assumed			1.79	24.46	.085	2.291
Learning	Equal variances assumed	3.05	.093	3.69	25	.001	6.516
	Equal variances not assumed			3.64	20.40	.002	6.516

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the SOC and EPL scores for males and females in a social networking site. There was no statistically significant difference in scores for males ($M = 27.21$, $SD = 3.19$) and females ($M = 24.92$, $SD = 3.43$; $t(25) = 1.79$, $p = 0.084$, two-tailed) in the SOC construct. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 2.29, 95% CI: -0.33 to 4.91) was large ($\eta^2 = 0.11$). However, for EPL scale, there were significant differences in scores for males ($M = 53.28$, $SD = 3.56$) and females ($M = 46.76$, $SD = 5.46$; $t(25) = 3.69$, $p = 0.001$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 6.52, 95% CI: 2.79 to 10.24) was very large ($\eta^2 = 0.35$).

VI. DISCUSSION

This paper investigated the relationship between students' SOC and EPL in the social networking context of (FB). FB as a social networking site could make several positive contributions to the improvement of SOC and students' EPL. Detailed analysis of the sections indicated that students showed basically positive attitude towards FB as a language learning tool, and the majority of them preferred FB in English, and agreed that FB makes learning English more interesting. This study has shown that FB promotes positive feelings among students about their EPL, having helped them to advance their English language skills to a great extent in grammar and writing, and to a lesser extent in reading. The results corroborate Mahmud and Ching [32] which examined students' English learning in FB. Likewise, the increased level of English perceived learning in this study corroborates Mitchell [34] study. The results indicate that the students had positive feelings about their English learning experience in the FB environment. However, unlike previous studies, in this study some students don't feel that FB improves their reading skills or encourage them much to read related articles to support their points of view in the FB discussion.

In regard to sense of community, the finding indicates that users in this FB page have a positive feeling of influence from their peers. Students agreed that they are given plenty of opportunities to learn together in FB, and they feel connected to others and also they feel confident

that others in FB academically support them. On the other hand, a majority of students did not agree that FB results in modest English learning, or promotes a desire to learn. These findings are consistent with the results of Zhang [35], where user satisfaction and SOC in a social network environment were found to better predict the continued usage of the network. However, Reich's (2010) findings suggest that the use of social networking sites represent networked individualism, rather than online communities. Based on the results of this study, FB is proven to be a useful tool in learning and improving English language skills as well as learners' sense of community.

The study also found a weak correlation ($r = 0.36$) between EPL and SOC, although these variables were positively correlated. This finding is congruent with the results of Top (2011), which showed a positive correlation between SOC and EPL, and that SOC was a predictor of EPL. Similarly, Halic, Lee, Paulusand and Spence, (2010) found SOC to be a significant predictor of perceived learning among students using blogs.

Finally, *t*-test results showed no statistically significant differences in male and female scores of SOC, although. The magnitude of the differences in the means was large. On the other hand, male and female EPL scores showed a statistically significant difference in favour of males with a very large magnitude in the mean differences. These results empirically support part of Rovai [24] that males and females tend to report the same sense of community in an online environment, while having different views of perceived learning.

VII. CONCLUSION

To summarize, the findings of this study provides evidence that FB, as an innovative language learning platform, in most respects, positively and meaningfully enhances learners' knowledge and language skills particularly in terms of their grammar and writing skills. It also benefits them in terms of developing a sense of community. FB has other useful pages with educational videos, tutorials, discussions, and other learning opportunities to support the development of English language skills for those eager to learn the language.

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