

## Students' Attitudes Towards the Use of Social Networks for Learning the English Language

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### Abstract

*Today, social networks are becoming rather popular throughout the world. Their multi-dimensional uses and specifications increase every day. However, research shows that their scientific and educational functions are still limited. We believe that social networks have the potential to create new contexts and opportunities that increase students' motivation for learning. Specifically, we believe that this is the case for learning a foreign language (English), which leads to more efficient and more successful experiences with language learning, as well as more positive attitudes towards the efficiency of social networks for educational purposes. As a frame of reference, we rely on the Technology Acceptance Model (Azjen and Fishbein, 1980; Davis, 1989) which focuses on satisfaction, expectations and perceived usefulness of technology. We studied the expectation of social networks in learning languages, as well as on their perceived usefulness. Twenty Iranian PhD students were enrolled in an online English course via Facebook. Through a study composed of a set of questionnaires, we investigated students' attitudes towards using social networks in learning languages*

*The results indicated that there is a significant difference between participants' attitudes before and after the course. In the pre-course questionnaire, the majority of participants considered Facebook to be generally useful because through these networks, they can communicate and share knowledge. After the online course, however, most students stated that, Facebook has high potentials for being used as effective formal educational tools. Furthermore, the post –course questionnaires revealed that students' positive attitudes towards the usefulness of social networks increased. In fact, by the end of the course, all participants agreed that using these networks for language learning can be effective and yield satisfactory linguistic outcomes. This study confirmed that every participant considered social networks to be highly effective and potential educational tools, especially for improving linguistic knowledge and performance in various online contexts and activities.*

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, online social networks (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter) receive a lot of attention because they have quickly gained popularity the world (Silius, Miilumäki, Huhtamäki, Tebest, Meriläinen & Pohjolaine, 2010)[1]. In fact, in recent years, these social networks have been able to make a revolution in the fields of communication (Espuny, Gonzalez, Lleixa & Gisbert, 2011)[2] and information and knowledge sharing (Grosbeck, 2009, Albion, 2008)[3]. In particular, they have attracted the attention of the young generation (Hamid, Chang and Kurnia, 2009)[4] as well as university students (Brady, Holcomb & Smith, 2010)[5] because of their interactive and multidimensional characteristic; these networks allow their enthusiastic users, all familiar with the fast growing world of technology and internet, to freely and quickly share, with their family, friends and colleagues, the most significant moments of their lives, in addition to their ideas, opinions and beliefs. Furthermore, in a study conducted in 2009, Harrison and Thomas[6] illustrated how these networks can have a direct impact on learning, notably the learning of foreign languages, because of languages' multicultural and interactive nature. This claim is supported by various other studies (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Godwin-Jones, 2006; Baralt, 2009; Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Motteram & Sharma, 2009)[7] which also underline the potential of social networks for teaching and learning foreign languages, for improving and enhancing learners' oral and written language skills, and for the promotion and development of language learning all over the world.

In recent studies, the influences of using Facebook on language learning, learners' motivation and learners' self confidence have been investigated. Yet students' attitudes towards the use of these networks for learning languages constitute a significant factor to study; we believe that it is important to identify and understand students' attitudes towards the use of these new interactive learning instruments (social networks) for language instruction because according to the theory of Azjen & Fishbein (1980)[8], beliefs influence attitudes which are considered the basis of behavior. In other

words, having a negative or positive view influences the intention of performing or not performing in an activity, or the amount and quality of participation. Moreover, as Glover & Brunin (1990)[9] reported, people's positive and negative attitudes toward any issue will influence their degree of acceptance and the nature of their interactions. After all, being aware of individuals' "attitudes toward social networks is of great importance since students and lecturers' behaviors can be predicted on the basis of acceptance or non-acceptance of these networks". Lee, Cho, Gay, Davidson, & Ingraffia, (2003)[10] argue that understanding the usefulness of technology also has a direct influence on students' attitude and satisfaction level. That is, a positive attitude towards a specific technology will increase the application of that technology. Therefore, in general, it seems that being aware of students' attitudes towards using social networks for learning languages can help adapt and use these networks in a more constructive and practical way.

### 1.1. Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is one of the most cited models in explaining attitudes toward technology. Its roots can be traced back to the theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) which was developed by Davis (1989) to predict the adoption and usage of new technologies. TAM predicts under what circumstances users accept and understand a technology. In fact, this model explains how individual perceptions influence attitudes (Lee et al., 2003). According to TAM, perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEoU) are the two major factors that influence rejection or acceptance of a technology. It is in the sight of these research, models and theories that we have dedicated this paper to the analysis and study of the differences in students' attitude towards the use of social networks for learning languages before and after an online English course offered via Facebook. More precisely, our research questions are as follows:

- Is there a difference in students' attitude towards ease of use of these networks before and after the course?
- Is there a difference in students' expectations of these networks before and after the course?

## 2. Method

This study, in form of a survey research, explored the relationships among the above mentioned variables, that is, students' attitudes and expectations towards the use of social networks for language learning, as expressed by students before and after the course.

### 2.1. Statistical Population and Sample Size

Statistical population consisted of twenty PhD students living in Schengen zone countries, with an intermediate command on the English language were selected through random sampling. In this educational English language course, offered via the social network Facebook, all participants used the book *Face2 Face*; the instructors organized their lesson plans and/or activities on this book as well. Student had to interact and perform different assignments on the group's wall on Facebook. Each student had to write a short paragraph on a daily basis, on a specific subject, and then post it on the group's wall. Students were permitted to use any kind of support instruments and/or educational resources available to them on the wall of the group or in their peers' feedbacks, for example pictures, videos, links, etc. Along with these activities, students were encouraged to raise various questions that dealt with the assigned activities, to which other students and/or the expert responded. Moreover, they shared with others what they considered to be interesting or useful.

Alongside the activities performed on Facebook, all participants also answered a set of questionnaires (using social network in learning language) before and after the course. The questionnaire for this research consisted of 24 statements that respondents answered with a five-item Likert scale. This questionnaire analyzed the following subscale: the ease of use of social networks, and the usefulness of using social networks in foreign language learning.

### 2.2. The Validity and Reliability of Scales

In table 1 presented the value of Cronbach Alpha is calculated to be 0.82 for subscale1 and 0.90 for subscale2.

	<i>N of Items</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>
<b>Subscale 1</b>	6	<b>0.81</b>
<b>Subscale2</b>	15	<b>0.90</b>

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Subscales in pretest

### 2.3. The Descriptive Analysis of Context Variables

50% of those participating in this course were men and 50% were women. Moreover, 65% of them were 25 to 30 years old and 35% were 30 to 35.

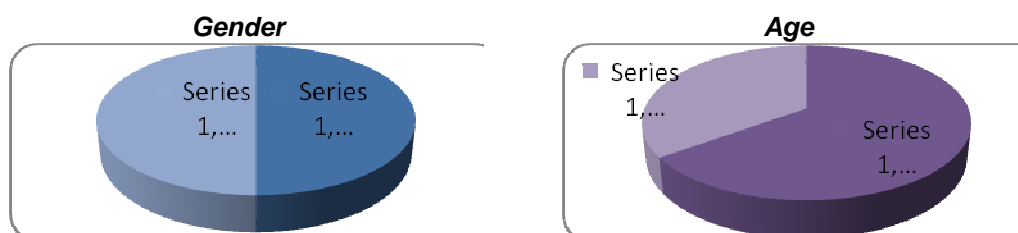


Figure 1: Pie Chart of Gender and Age.

75% of the participants in the course considered Facebook to be their favorite social network. 15% named YouTube and 10% named Linked in as their favorite social network.

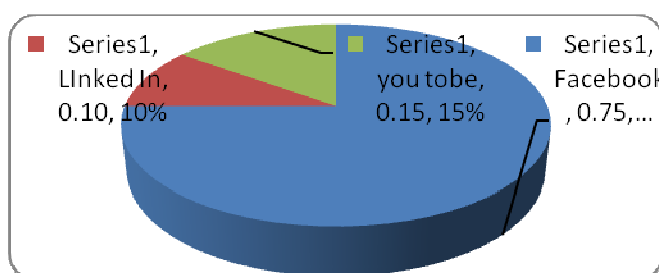


Figure 2: Pie Chart of Favorite Social Network

Table2 presents participants' favorite social network based on gender and age.

		<b>Gender% within Favorite SN</b>		<b>Age % within Favorite SN</b>	
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	25-30	30-35
<b>Favori SN</b>	<i>Faceb ook</i>	53.3%	46.7%	66.7 %	33.3%
	<i>Linked In</i>	.0%	100.0%	50.0 %	50.0%
	<i>YouTu be</i>	100.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%

Table 2: Cross tabulation of Favorite NS versus Gender &Age

### 3. Study Results

Based on the two research questions proposed above, the following results were obtained from the analysis of the questionnaires before and after the online course:

- The ease of using social networks for learning foreign languages
- The usefulness of social networks in foreign languages learning

### 3.1. The Ease of Using Social Networks for Learning Languages

The following table indicates the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the variables of subscale 1 in pretest and posttest:

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean test result ( $\mu=18$ )		
				t	d.f	Sig.
<b>Subscale 1</b>	Pretest	20.9000	1.94395	6.67	19	.00
	Posttest	21.9500	.94451	18.70	19	.00

Table 3: Descriptive and test about Subscale 1 (in *pretest* and *posttest*)

Since each of these scales are the result of answers to 6 items (with the possible answers of 1 to 5), in order to evaluate individuals' attitudes in subscale 1, one-sample t-test was used and their mean value was compared to middle value  $6 \times 3 = 18$ ). The significance level of tests indicates that in both cases, individuals' attitudes are in accordance with subscale 1.

In the next step, we use paired t-test to investigate the change in students' attitudes between pre test and posttest.

	Paired t-test results		
	T	d.f	Sig.
<b>Subscale 1</b>	-2.195	19	.041

Table 4: Compare Subscale 1 in *pretest* and *posttest*

As table 4 shows, test results indicate that the difference is significant ( $t = -2.195$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.041$ ). In other words, after the course, participants' attitudes have positively changed about subscale 1.

### 3.2. The Usefulness of Using Social Networks in Foreign Language Learning

The descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the variables of subscale 2 in pretest and posttest are presented in table 5.

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean test result ( $\mu=45$ )		
				t	d.f	Sig.
<b>Subscale 2</b>	Pretest	33.4500	4.77356	-10.821	19	1.000
	Posttest	50.9500	1.27630	20.849	19	.000

Table 5: Descriptive and test about Subscale 2 (in *pretest* and *posttest*)

The significance level of the tests shows that only in the posttest, the participants have a positive attitude towards subscale 2. In pretest, students expressed no positive attitude toward the use of social networks. In the next step, we used paired t-test to investigate changes in students' attitudes between pretest and posttest. As table 6 shows, the test results indicate that the difference is significant.



	<b>Paired t-test results</b>		
	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i> <i>.f</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<b>Subscale 2</b>	- 15.271	1 9	.000

Table 6: Compare Subscale 2 in *pretest* and *posttes*

#### 4. Discussion

The present study indicates that students' attitudes towards the ease of use of social network in general become more positive after the course. However, it is interesting that we notice a much bigger change in students' attitude towards using these networks *for educational purposes*; in particular, we observed that participants in our study had a much more positive attitude towards using the social network Facebook in learning foreign languages after the course. They believed that this network has a significant potential for functioning as an educational tool. Based on the theory of Technology Acceptance Model, understanding the usefulness of a technology and its ease of use are the primary motivating factors for accepting that technology. As a result, the social network Facebook seems to present the necessary capabilities to be used as a motivating instrument for learning foreign languages.

Research by Ajjan & Hartshorne (2008)[11] indicates that using social networks in class increases the student's course and learning satisfaction. Along the same lines, Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley (2009)[12] report that students view networks like Facebook as purely social means although they believe these networks are at times used informally for educational purposes. Moreover Silius et al. (2010) argue that students expressed a desire for using social networks in higher education because this employment of this technology would enhance their learning. As confirmed by Lewis's research (2010)[13], students were motivated to use the social networks; in fact, he claims that social networks should be included in the curriculum for targeting students' current needs as well as modes of interaction, communication and learning. Our results agree with these outcomes in that they all express a positive attitude expressed by students (in terms of increased learning satisfaction, teaching potential, and motivation) for using social networks for (language) education. In particular, our study concurs with the study by Espuny et al (2011) who identify a general positive attitude among students towards social networks because these networks have great potential to enhance education.

The results presented in this study, gathered through an analysis of students' questionnaires on their attitude towards the use of social networks for language learning are a sample of 21<sup>st</sup> century students' positive attitudes towards the integration of technology, especially social networks, to which the younger generation seems to be rather attached, in educational curricula. Although we are aware that our participants are not representative of the entire university populations that live in the world, these results gave us the starting point for learning which features of the social network Facebook seem to be of more interest and more use for learning languages.

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