Social Networking Sites for Students at Beginner Level: Do They Work?

Tiziana Carpi

University of Milan (Italy)

tiziana.carpi@unimi.it

Abstract

With new generations of students relying on online information and virtual communications for their interaction, it is not surprising that in the last years researchers have turned to Social Networking Sites (SNSs) as new potential tools for L2 learning, advocating that their usage should be incorporated into class-related activities in higher education "to capture these students' imagination and fit their socializing habits". [1] [2]

However, in contrast with previous studies that have investigated different ways to exploit SNSs mainly within intermediate-advanced FL classes to either foster communicative competence or manage class activities [3][4]*, the present paper suggests an alternative use of one of them (Facebook) for beginners with no prior knowledge of the FL (Japanese) at the University of Milan.*

Given that classes where the L2 has a different writing system from students' L1 need to invest a lot of time to introduce and practice the script, less space is dedicated to activities that digital natives would need most to become proficient in a multicultural, hyper-connected society.

A pilot project, which run for ten weeks, from October to December 2013, was implemented within the first year of the Japanese language course and explored: 1) students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of FB for Japanese language learning; 2) the potential benefits of FB in terms of language learning.

The project aimed at helping students familiarize and exercise with a different script while being exposed to authentic language through Japanese websites. About a hundred students were offered to take part - on a voluntary basis – to a closed FB group and participate to language activities delivered through FB, a tools they are already very familiar with.

The framework at the core of the project was drawn from previous research in CALL effectiveness. [5] *The 'Evaluation diamond' by Leakey* [6] *was taken as reference for project evaluation and data analysis. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through: questionnaires (pre and post project), language tasks posted on FB on a weekly basis and three language tests. Qualitative data show students' very positive perception on taking part to the FB activities and on their language improvement as well as an increased interest and motivation in the target language and culture. While these results reflects what can be defined students' "perceived effectiveness" of the tool, quantitative data were used for further investigation. Results show that students who participated to the FB project performed better in the language tests than those who did not.*

Data, assessed through statistical analysis, offer insights to better grasp the potentials that SNSs may offer, even at beginner levels, in developing participation, motivation, language and cultural learning awareness and in speeding up their learning process.

1. Introduction and previous research

In the last decade Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have grown so popular among young generations that research has found that 90% of those aged 18-29 y. have profiles on them (PewResearch Internet Project, updated March 2014). This trend has led many researchers to consider the potentials of SNS for L2 learning and an increasing number of studies have emerged in the last few years.

According to studies conducted on the use of SNSs for L2 learning, these social, virtual environments offer learners opportunities for intercultural communication with authentic native speakers. Previous research has found that SNS implementation in the language classroom brings benefits in the development of communicative and socio-pragmatic competence, a better knowledge of the L2 culture, motivation and interpersonal relationship (see, e.g.,[7][8][4][9][1][3][10]). Other studies have shown not only the obstacles that may limit their use but also the variety of implementation methods available according to the type of SNS and the goal set by the course/instructor.[1]

However, despite the increasing interest of research in the use of SNS for L2 learning, studies conducted on logographic languages, such as Japanese or Chinese, are still few.

Previous projects implementing SNS in formal settings share a few common features: (a) the intermediate or upper-intermediate language level of the students involved; (b) the small size of

groups (10-25 students); (c) the goal either to promote communicative competence through the use of the target language, or to use the SNS as a class management tool to present or share assignments, etc.

Considering the increasing use of SNSs in new generation's daily life and the curiosity of our students toward the use of new tools for language learning, the current project stems from the will to exploit a SNS in a radical different way for a course of Japanese language for absolute beginners taught by the author at the University of Milan. A pilot project was designed and Facebook (FB) was selected as a learning tool to be integrated in addition to the class hours.

2. The objectives

In contrast with the features shared by previous studies (above), the current project: (a') addressed absolute beginners with no prior knowledge of the L2 (Japanese); (b') was implemented in a class of a hundred students; (c') aimed at helping students familiarize and exercise with a different script exposing them to authentic language through Japanese websites since from the first weeks of learning.

The project was implemented with the following objectives:

1) verify whether the use of FB might have a positive effect on learning Japanese in a large group of students at beginner level;
2) help students practice (on computer) and familiarize with a different script (Japanese) exposing them to authentic language through Japanese websites since from the first weeks of learning;
3) measure students' language improvements;
4) gather students' perceptions and attitude toward the (their perceived) effectiveness of FB and toward the experiment.

3. Method and survey procedure

The methodology underpinning the project, both for design and evaluation, was drawn from research in CALL effectiveness and in SLA and Leakey's Model for Evaluation 2 (MFE2) was adopted after a slight revision.[6] The structure of the project incorporates the two types of evaluative criteria elaborated by Leakey, but in the present paper only results from the second and main method (the "evaluation diamond") will be presented. Leakey states that "Most CALL studies have tended to gather mainly qualitative data and correlate them with similar studies in the literature; a more powerful model will add quantitative data and triangulate them with the qualitative data and similar studies in the literature (…)".[6] According to the model, on one hand *qualitative measures* (descriptive statistics) are used to analyse phenomenological data such as surveys, questionnaires, observation. On the other, *quantitative measures* (inferential statistics) are adopted to analyse empirical data such as (pre-post) tests, attendance, etc.

The participants to the project, which run for ten weeks from October to December 2013, were absolute beginners enrolled in the first year of a Japanese Language course within the BA degree in Language and Cultural Mediation, University of Milan. At the beginning of the course students were offered to take part, on a voluntary basis, to a project which included the use of FB in addition to the class hours, for activities related to Japanese language and culture learning. A closed FB group was created and half of the class (N = 48) joined it. The total number of students participating to the whole project, including questionnaires, was 103 (N = 103), and the number of those who took the language tests was 112 (N= 112) in total. The goal of the course taught by the author of the project is the introduction to the Japanese script: two syllabaries (katakana and hiragana, for a total of about a hundred symbols), the first hundred kanji (Chinese characters), and rōmaji, the system of transcription of the symbols in the roman letters.

Data were collected in three stages:

1) two questionnaires, one before and one at the end of the project, of which one section to be addressed only to the participants to the FB group (*qualitative data*);
2) students' response to a total of 13 tasks posted on FB (participation degree to the FB group) (*quantitative data*);
3) three language tests (*quantitative data*).

In order to avoid non spontaneous responses, it was emphasized that replying to tasks was absolutely optional. The workflow of the project is exemplified in Fig. 1.

Fig.1. Flowchart showing the structure of the project.
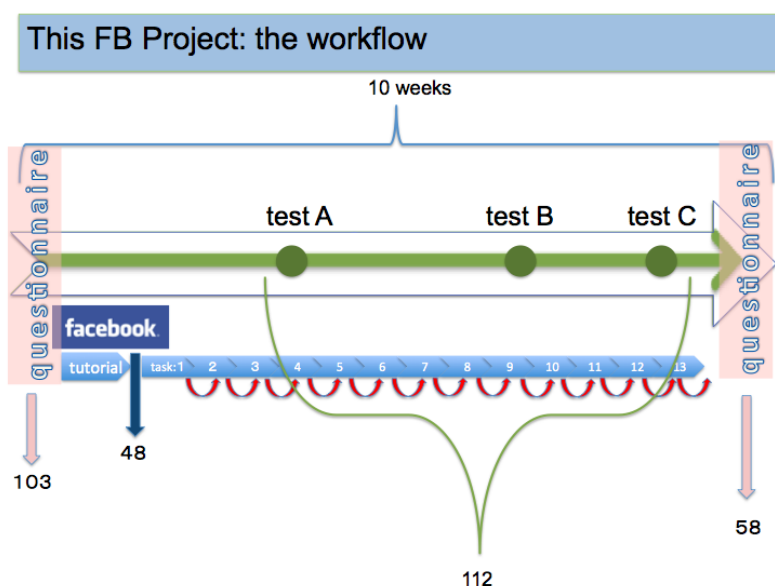
The two questionnaires gathered not only personal information but also students' overall attitude and perception on technology in general and specifically on FB for learning a foreign language and its culture. The last section of the second questionnaire was addressed only to FB members.
Tasks were posted on the FB Timeline on a weekly basis. Students were allowed to complete tasks at their pace and it was emphasized that replying to them was absolutely optional.
Last, three language tests were submitted during the course. The structure of the test was meant to be very similar to the structure of the final written exam and represented good practice for all students; furthermore it equally evaluated all students' language performance.

4. Discussion
4.1 Qualitative results
Data collection was carried out into two different steps.
Qualitative data were collected through the analysis of the responses to the two questionnaires (yes/no and open-ended questions) and students' activity rate on FB, while quantitative data through the results of the language tests.
The first data provide interesting clues about students' perceptions on using FB to study a foreign language and culture. The majority (75.8%) reported that, thanks to FB, they improved the Japanese script using digital devices and 78.8% claimed that FB helped them improve their ability to read as well as memorize (75.8%) the two kana scripts. Students' responses show that they fully or mostly agreed on saying that taking part to the FB project improved their overall linguistic skills and deepened (81.8%) their interest toward Japanese language and culture. They felt stimulated (57.6%) and did not think FB tasks took time away from their overall study (75.7%) or demotivated them (81.8%). Students also expressed their preference to see similar FB project integrated also into more advanced courses (93%).
As for the open-ended questions, a few of them explored students' preferences over the different types of tasks and what they would change of the project. Some students gave their preference to tasks which offered experiences they could face for real in Japan (e.g. to place an order in a Japanese fast food). Sharing strategies used to memorize kanji was one of the most popular tasks, and the one that familiarized them with Japanese culture and tradition.
Someone found the project and tasks "very enjoyable and useful, it should be absolutely implemented also in the future", and "stimulating my personal interests"; someone else wrote "I was impressed to know how many interesting National holidays there are in Japan!" Only a few lamented the lack of time to carry out the tasks, but even in that case one student wrote "instead of the computer I started using my iPhone to reply to tasks but the keyboard was too small and sometimes I did the tasks in my mind". When students were asked whether they would have changed anything of the FB project, the majority reported their satisfaction over the task contents and delivery ("perfectly organized", "nothing to change"). Only a few argued on the repetitive nature of some tasks (e.g. for those tasks whose response did not allow much variation or which were too mechanical).

4.2 Quantitative results

What emerged from the qualitative data is a general positive attitude on the effectiveness of SNS use for FL learning and on the way and content delivered through FB. However, these data represent the students' impression of what they perceived as beneficial, that is their "perceived effectiveness". Their perception may not correspond to a real language improvement. Results emerging from quantitative analysis provide more measurable data and feedback.

In order to analyse students' language performance, the sum of the results of the three language tests were analysed using statistical analysis (ANOVA). Students were divided into three groups: those who did not join FB, those who did, and those who did but were not active. Students' activity rate was measured and data were analysed. Test results show that the total score in the three katakana tests obtained by the active FB members was 25% higher than those who did not join FB. However, those who joined FB but did not participate actively scored 5% less than those who did not joined at all. In order to evaluate students' participation rate an index FBI (FB activity Index) was created. The index measures students' response rate (quality response) to the 13 tasks.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the effect of FB usage on beginner students of Japanese L2 since the very early stage of their learning. One of the goals of the project was to let students feel at ease in an environment that they usually use for private matters and let them choose what task and when to do it. Most tasks required students to work with katakana, which is the script they are still struggling with at this stage of language learning.

Data analysis show that, beside students' very positive attitudes towards the use of FB to learn Japanese language and culture, remarkable conclusions can be drawn from the test results. Despite the voluntary nature of the FB project, 69% of the participants were active in their responses to tasks. Participants to FB enjoyed the project and expressed their willingness to join similar activities also in classes at upper levels.

Acknowledgements

References

[1] McBride, K. (2009). Social-networking sites in foreign language classes: Opportunities for re-creation. In *The next generation: Social networking and online collaboration in foreign language learning*, edited by Lomicka, L. and Lord, G., 35-58. *CALICO Monograph Series*, 8. San Marcos, TX: CALICO.

[2] Blattner, G., Fiori, M. (2009). Facebook in the Language Classroom: Promises and Possibilities. *Instructional Technology and Distance Learning (ITDL)*, 6(1), 17-28.

[3] Prichard, C. (2013). Training L2 learners to use Facebook appropriately and effectively. *CALICO Journal,* 30(2), 204-225.

[4] Hitosugi, C.I. (2011). Using a social networking site in Japanese class. In *CALL: What's Your Motivation?*, edited by Forsythe, E., Gorham, T., Grogan, M., Jarrell, D., Chartrand, R., Lewis, P. 72-83. Tokyo: JALT CALL SIG.

[5] Chapelle, C.A. (2001). *Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Leakey J. (2011). *Evaluating Computer-Assisted Language Learning. An Integrated Approach to Effectiveness Research in CALL*. Bern: Peter Lang.

[7] Antenos-Conforti, E. (2009). Microblogging on Twitter: Social networking in intermediate Italian classes. In Lomicka, L. and Lord G., *The Next Generation: Social Networking and Online Collaboration in Foreign Language Learning*, 59-90. San Marcos, Texas: CALICO.

[8] Concheiro, P. (2010). *Using Facebook in the language classroom.* Paper presented at ICT for Language Learning, Florence, Italy, November.

[9] Ito, M., Horst, H., Bittanti, M., Boyd, D., Herr-Stephenson, B., Lange, P., G., Pascoe, C.J., Robinson, L. (2008). *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project.* Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation.

[10] Reinhardt, J., Zander, V. (2011). Social Networking in an intensive English program classroom: a language socialization. A language socialization perspective. *CALICO Journal*, 28(2), pp. 326-344.