Facebook as a Language Learning Environment: A Descriptive Study on ESL Learners' Perceptions

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Abstract

Social networking site like Facebook has been used as a modern source of communication and interaction. It also has the potential to be an effective academic too. This paper aims to present a comprehensive picture of what has already been discovered regarding Facebook as a language learning environment and it further tends to investigate ESL learners' perceptions of Facebook as a language learning environment in Pakistani context particularly in Sindh. The sample who participated in this research were 100 higher secondary students studying in IBA-Public School Sukkur. The findings of this study revealed that the ESL learners in Sindh believe Facebook as a language learning environment helps to enhance language skills including reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar. Altogether students showed positive perceptions regarding this learning model. So, in light of the findings it is recommended for the Teachers teaching English as a second language in Sindh, Pakistan should plan their lessons that involve Facebook as a language learning platform.

Keywords: Facebook, Language Learning Environment, ESL Learners, Perceptions, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Social networking sites have been the major source of communication in the recent years because these sites serve the purpose of virtual communities for the people where they can share ideas, and information and make relationships domestically as well as globally (Makri & Schlegelmilch, 2017). Social networking sites have actually modified the mode of communication and pattern of exchange of information completely (Nadkami & Hofmann, 2012). To see such popularity and usefulness, social networking sites have been hot topics for educators to explore educational use (Blankenship, 2011). Among all the social network sites Facebook is the most popular site used by 2.20 billion people around the world (Facebook, 2018). Majority of the users are youngsters and adults (Shepherd, 2015). Facebook has influenced the various fields like business, media and

fashion industry exponentially. Having seen such influence on these fields scholars and educators have been prompted to explore its use for academic purpose (Niu, 2017).

One of the academic fields of interest for scholars is language teaching and learning around the world. They have tried to explore the role of Facebook for learning language. Studies carried out in Australia and Asian countries conclude that the use of Facebook for language learning has been an important source of improvement in English language learning. Manan, Alias, and Pandian (2012), conducted a research in Malaysia and they found that teenagers in Malaysia spend more time using Facebook and other social sites outside the class. Further, they say that since English is medium of communication in these sites, there are significant benefits of using Facebook as a tool for language learning (p. 1). Scholars and educators believe that there are many features offered by Facebook like 'Facebook group' provided with cautious manipulation, can be incorporated in language learning as a powerful tool. Clark and Gruba (2010), conducted a study in Australia in which they suggested that it is very necessary for teachers to integrate social networking sites like Facebook in language classes to make learning environment interesting for students. In addition, Yunus, Salehi, and Chenzi (2012) made an action research in which they integrated Facebook into a writing course of ESL and they found numerous advantages of Facebook as a tool for learning language skills and some of the advantages are;

- The Facebook allows students to communicate with their teachers and classmates after the class. Facebook also affects their motivation and strengthened their social networking practices.
- The Facebook also helps teachers to discuss about the assignments and help out students outside the class. Not only this, but they also share some useful links through Facebook for improving students' writing skill and students share their written draft with their teachers.

However, Yunus et al. (2012) have also highlighted some disadvantages of Facebook. For instance, for language learning through Facebook all the learners must have access to the internet. Many students are accustomed to the traditional book-centered approach so they do not like to read the tasks online in soft copy. The studies conducted in the different corners of the world on Facebook are mainly focusing on particular issues. For instance, the effect of Facebook on electronic homework assignment, reading skill and process based writing etc. However, it can be said that it is nearly impossible to evaluate Facebook as a Language learning environment without investigating how language learners actually perceive it. Second, there are also a few research studies on Facebook as a language-learning environment in the Pakistani ESL context particularly in Sindh. So, this study will be a big contribution in the literature of ESL learning and teaching.

1.1. Statement of the Problem
Use of Social Media particularly of Facebook is a quite new phenomenon in Pakistan. Since Pakistan is a developing country, use of modern means of communication is still at embryonic stage. The integration of ICT in education is a rare phenomenon particularly in least developed

regions. There had been significant investment in introducing means of communication in Pakistan during Musharraf era which has begun to bear fruits in terms of adoption of media tools in the country. Facebook is also one such emerging online connectivity platform. Hence, this phenomenon of rising online community in Pakistan has encouraged research studies for how online media has influenced us individually and in collective capacity. Keeping the rise of social media particularly Facebook in view, there is debate on how this platform has influenced patterns of life in the country. There are numerous instances available in which we confront mass evidence of informal learning of both constructive and negative attitudes in communities. What remains little researched is the use of Facebook in facilitating academic growth particularly in learning English. English, as we know, is not a mother tongue of our nation. However, most of the schools in private as well as public sector teach English from very beginning. The teens most frequently attend academies to develop English language skills. In addition, the magazines, newspapers and TV channels also serve as a means to develop these skills. However, the most recent phenomenon that has contributed to the development of English language skills is learning through social media which is why this paper aims at exploring the relationship between Facebook and development of English Language skills.

1.2. The Aim of the Study

Despite the fact that the use of Facebook among higher secondary students is undeniable, the significance of this tool to effect students' language learning positively remains a question. This can be a case that Facebook in Pakistan is intended for social communication and interaction, not necessarily for English language learning. Thus, there is a need for a thoughtful and rigorous integration to inculcate a basis for the status of new teaching and learning practices.

The current study aims to explore the ESL learners' perceptions of Facebook as a language learning environment following two main aspects; the general perceptions of Facebook and second aspect is to find perceptions of Facebook as a language learning environment. The core aim of study is to depict a comprehensive picture of what has already been explored regarding the use of Facebook as language learning environment and more specifically it tends to answer the below mentioned research questions:

1.3. Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of ESL learners in Sindh, Pakistan as a source of socialization, interaction and educational environment?
- How do ESL learners in Sindh, Pakistan perceive Facebook language learning environment and what is its influence on knowledge and basic skills of language?

2. Literature Review

Facebook is one of the most famous social networking sites which facilitates ESL learners in the improvement of their language skills. It does not only improve students' performance of English language but it also motivates and triggers students to interact authentically (Blattner & Fiori,

2009). They further stated that Facebook also offers some constructive educational features which are also increasing day by day (p.8). According to Leutner and Plass (1998) Facebook is very beneficial and useful in terms of informal communication site.

The findings of the study conducted by McCarthy (2010) reveal that Facebook groups play an important role in the development of language skills. These groups afford the members which have joined those groups with daily updates of vocabulary, grammar and other English related information. Conversation and discussion in those groups by group members also be one of the factors contributing in the improvement of language. Such interaction and discussion in groups fosters student-centered approach and provide students autonomy to practice and acquire language skills in a conducive and positive environment (Birch & Volkov, 2007). Whereas, (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010) concluded that Facebook impacts at great level on students' performance in English language because Facebook these days has been part of routine of students. Bakar and Latif (2010), investigated students' feedback on use of Facebook as language learning tool and they found that students believed Facebook was a productive tool for learning English online. It provided more collaborative environment of learning.

According to Liu (2010), for students' educational communities Facebook has been the potential tool and valuable resource which is widely used and the most popular platform among students for social networking. Not only this, but it is also called the latest source of interaction adopted by students used for academic purpose. However, Haverback (2009) indicated in his study that when students were involved in Facebook discussions, they felt motivated and grasped a better understanding of the topics. In addition students became creative when they read the assignments individually and generated new ideas. Whereas, Alhomod et al. (2012), suggested Facebook can be very effective tool to create an English language network may be called e-class where members of that network can share language related information with other users. He further claimed that all the previous studies focused on the teacher-students and student-student interaction on Facebook but they did not focus on the use of Facebook for creating e-classroom.

Shih (2013), conducted a study to investigate the effect of using blended technology along with Facebook and peer assessment for one of his courses, where he found that incorporation of Facebook proved to be very helpful which assisted students in learning to communicate in the context of business English. Shih (2013), further said that when students' assessed were involved in peer assessment on Facebook, their professional knowledge was also improved. Supporting the same idea Mahmud and Ching (2012) reported in the findings of his study that usage of Facebook enhanced the reading and writing skills of students, their social circles expanded which ultimately improved the communication skills of students.

Research indicates that those studies which investigated the utilization of Facebook in the context of language learning have shown positive results. For example, Birky and Collins (2011),

conducted a correlational study in which they found a positive relationship between Facebook and foreign language learning and cultural awareness. Moreover, Aydin (2012), stated that Facebook had a powerful impact on language teaching and learning. The related literature suggests that those teachers who used Facebook in their language classroom actually engaged their students in e-assignments (Kitsis, 2008), developed reading and writing skills through sharing the posts on Facebook (Kabilan et al., 2010) and can be utilized as a portfolio tool in an English language classroom to improve process based writing (Waters, 2009).

On the other hand, there are some studies which has also highlighted some negative consequences of use of Facebook which include inappropriate comments (Butler, 2010), and cyberbullying (Catanzaro, 2011). In addition, Couros (2008) indicated that Facebook also caused a problem of privacy among youngsters . However it should be noted that the studies showing the negative consequences were limited to its general use but they did not investigate how ESL learners perceive the negative consequences of Facebook.

To conclude, it can be said that all the reviewed studies seem too limited as no study was found on perceptions of ESL learners that how ESL learners perceive Facebook as language learning environment particularly in Pakistan, which makes this study much significant to investigate the ESL learners' perception of Facebook as a language learning environment in Sindh, Pakistan.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study used the descriptive quantitative design to investigate ESL learners' perceptions of Facebook as a language learning environment. Descriptive research design is known as scientific method that involves observation and description of the behaviour of any subject without influencing it (Anderson & Arsenault, 2005). The current study employed the use of questionnaire as data collection instrument which was designed to accumulate all the information pertaining to the objectives of the study.

3.2. Sample

The participants of this study were students of higher secondary classes including xi and xii studying in IBA-Public Sukkur. Who used to English as one of their compulsory subject and have Facebook accounts also. The participants were selected using convenience sampling procedure. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), stated that convenience sampling procedure belongs to quantitative procedures in which participants are selected by researchers on the basis of willingness and availability. This resulted in a sample size of 100 respondents in which 54 were male and 46 were female whose average number of Facebook friends was 330 within the range of 26 and 1200, however they also had some foreign friends with whom the respondents communicated in English language and their average number was 36 within the range of 0 to 450. The participants were also

asked for the number of English language related groups joined by them and each of them was the member of at-least 5 groups related to English language and Grammar.

3.3. Instrument

The data collection used in this study was questionnaire and survey method was followed to collect the data. The questionnaire used was originally developed by Aydin (2017), but it was modified to suit the current study and its context. The validity of modified questionnaire was validated by two experts who were requested to check clarity in statements and suitability in content. The questionnaire was consisted of 20 items which probed respondents' gender, grade, the number of Facebook friend including foreign friends and the number Facebook groups related to English language joined. The instrument used five point Likert scale ranging from five to one (5=never, 4= rarely, 3=sometimes, 2=usually, always=1).

3.4. Data Collection Process

For data collection phase first of all the permission was granted from the administration. The purpose and significance of study, research methodology, ethical consideration, the role of researcher and purpose behind participants' choice were explained to the respondents who were invited to participate in the survey. It was assured that their privacy will be respected and this will create no harm for them. The participation in this study was purely on voluntary basis and survey was conducted within the bounds of respect for the respondents.

3.5. Data Analysis and Procedure

The collected data from the participants was analyzed to answer the desired research questions. The statements were analyzed using the descriptive statistics in order to find frequencies, mean and std. deviation which were presented in the form of tables. Students' demographics were also asked to support the data and data was analyzed using the Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS).

4. Findings

This sections presents the result obtained from the collected data which is presented in two sections in the form of tables. The first section shows the findings on ESL learners' general perceptions of Facebook as a medium for communication and interaction. Whereas, the second section presents the findings on ESL learners' perceptions of Facebook as language learning environment particularly.

Table 1. ESL learners' perceptions of Facebook as a medium for communication and interaction

Statement	Total Number	Frequencies (%)					Mean	Std. Dev.
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always		

I use Facebook is good for communication and interaction.	100	2.0	8.0	30.0	27.0	30.0	2.1900	1.05117
I use Facebook to communicate with my family members.	100	19`	36	28	6	11	3.4600	1.19274
I use Facebook to communicate my friends.	100	0	9	19	29	43	1.9400	.99311
I use Facebook to communicate my classmates.	100	5	15	33	19	28	2.5000	1.19342
I use Facebook to communicate my teachers.	100	17	28	34	8	13	3.2800	1.22334
Facebook is an environment for socialization.	100	0	5	15	28	52	1.7300	.89730
I use Facebook to know about social activities happening around.	100	3	9	18	15	55	1.9000	1.16775
Facebook helps in learning English because the medium of instruction is English on Facebook.	100	0	6	19	26	49	1.8200	.94687
Facebook can be used for educational activities.	100	3	8	27	32	30	2.2200	1.05964
I discuss academic tasks with my friends on Facebook.	100	9	24	40	13	14	3.0100	1.14146

According to the findings shown in table 1, ESL learners in Sindh perceive Facebook a very good toll for communication and interaction. Table 1. Shows that 30% of students said they use Facebook for communication always and 27% said they usually use Facebook for communication which altogether becomes a good percentage with the mean x=2.1900 to support the statement that ESL learners in Sindh use Facebook for communication and interaction. But mean score of second statement which is x= 3.4600 shows that large number of students do not use Facebook to interact with their family members rather they communicate with their friends and classmates which is indicated in the mean scores of third and fourth statements x= 1.9400 and x= 2.5000. However, the level of communication decreased regarding their teachers x= 3.2800. ESL learners in Sindh prefer to use Facebook for socialization x= 1.7300 and knowing social activities happening around x= 1.9000. The majority of ESL learners agreed that Facebook helps in language learning with the mean score x= 1.8200 and they sometimes talk about educational activities on Facebook with their friends x= 3.0100.

Table 2. ESL learners' perceptions of Facebook as a language learning environment.

Statement	Total Number	Frequencies (%)					Mean	Std. Dev.
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always		
Facebook is a language learning environment.	100	4	7	24	22	44	2.0700	1.14816
When I chat on Facebook, I use English language which has improved English language skills a lot.	100	3	9	27	16	45	2.0900	1.16424
I learn vocabulary through Facebook.	100	3	12	38	20	27	2.4400	1.10390
Facebook helps to improve English language.	100	0	6	15	34	45	1.8200	.90319
Facebook is a good discussion forum which improves writing.	100	3	4	24	25	44	1.9700	1.05844
I read blogs and posts on Facebook and it has improved my reading skills. .	100	0	6	10	33	51	1.7100	.87957
I feel confident in writing and posting new ideas on Facebook timeline and I feel I am improving in my writing skill.	100	7	6	27	23	37	2.2300	1.21319

Many people share many English related posts and it has improved my English language skills.	100	3	14	20	31	32	2.2500	1.14040
I watch videos related to English shared by my Facebook friends and I learn many things related to English Grammar.	100	5	18	26	13	38	2.3900	1.29408
Because of Facebook my pronunciation has also improved as I watch videos so I learn pronunciation also.	100	6	13	27	29	25	2.4600	1.17568

According to the findings shown in table 2. ESL learners in Sindh perceive that Facebook provides an environment for language learning as 44% said always and 22% said usually with the mean score x= 2.0700. When ESL learners were asked their perceptions about improvement in language and overall language skills, the majority of students agreed that Facebook improves their language skills when they chat with their friends 1.8200 and x= 2.0900 respectively . Further when they were asked separate questions regarding the language skills ESL learners perceive that sometimes Facebook improves their vocabulary x= 2.4400, it usually enhances their writing skill x= 1.9700 and 2.2300. ESL learners in Sindh have also positive perceptions regarding improvement in reading skill x= 1.7100 and Grammatical concepts x= 2.3900.

5. Discussion

The aforementioned findings indicate certain factors. The first, the factors Why ESL learners in Sindh prefer less to communicate and interact with their family members and teachers as compared to friends and classmates may be because of age groups of the parents and teachers and familiarity with Facebook as parents in Sindh know less about Facebook than their kids (Aydin, 2014). In addition ESL learners' perceptions of communication and interaction can also be seen as an indication of respect for teacher in Sindhi culture because students in Sindh are supposed to behave more formal and in respectful manner with their teachers that is why social distance is considered as one of the factors of discipline. The second, why ESL learners perceive that Facebook does not contribute much to the pronunciation and listening skills may be because interaction on Facebook is mainly dependent on written interaction. Instead of all ESL learners in Sindh have positively perceive Facebook as a language learning environment.

6. Limitations of the Study

Like other studies this study is not far from the limitations. One of the limitations of the study is that participants of this study were limited to one school and number of the participants was also limited to 100 because of shortage of time and availibity. The other limitation of the study is that

data collected in this study is limited to the perspectives of the students. Further cross cultural research should be conducted to understand practical and theoretical aspects regarding variables like cultural differences and other determinants that may affect ESL learners' perceptions.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, Facebook is perceived as a positive tool for communication and interaction used by ESL learners in Sindh which helps to enhance English language skills among students including reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar by incorporating learner-centered approach. Facebook also provides a supportive and encouraging environment to practice and learn language skills among ESL learners in Sindh, Pakistan.

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Participant Questionnaire

Name		☐ **Male**				
Class		☐ **Fmale**		**Name of School**		
	Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
1	I use Facebook for communication and interaction.					
2	I use Facebook to communicate with my family members.					
3	I use Facebook to communicate my friends.					
4	I use Facebook to communicate my classmates.					
5	I use Facebook to communicate my teachers.					
6	Facebook is an environment for socialization.					
7	I use Facebook to know about social activities happening around.					
8	Facebook helps in learning English because the medium of instruction is English on Facebook.					
9	Facebook can be used for educational activities.					
10	I discuss academic tasks with my friends on Facebook.					
11	Facebook is a language learning environment.					

12	When I chat on Facebook, I use English language which has improved English language skills a lot.					
13	I learn vocabulary through Facebook.					
14	Facebook helps to improve English language.					
15	Facebook is a good discussion forum which improves writing.					
16	I read blogs and posts on Facebook and it has improved my reading skills. .					
17	I feel confident in writing and posting new ideas on Facebook timeline and I feel I am improving in my writing skill.					
18	Many people share many English related posts and it has improved my English language skills.					
19	I watch videos related to English shared by my Facebook friends and I learn many things related to English Grammar.					
20	Because of Facebook my pronunciation has also improved as I watch videos so I learn pronunciation also.					