Chapter 76
Learning Language Through Facebook

Vera Monika Leier
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to account for the experiences of tertiary students of German when a Facebook group and associated tasks is introduced as an assessed element of their language course. Ethnographic methods were applied, such as pre-, post questionnaires, interviews and fieldnotes. The data was collected by the instructor/researcher and subjected to thematic analysis. The students (n = 23) enjoyed Facebook but mostly used the site passively and only actively posted when required. This led to a flurry of posts at deadlines and less engagement between deadlines. Students wanted more feedback than the instructor was giving them, in an effort to make the interaction feel more authentic and spontaneous, as it is in non-educational, social Facebook.

INTRODUCTION

Facebook has been in use since the early 2000s and is the most widely used social networking site (SNS) among young people to date (Facebook-Statistics, 2013). Researchers tried to find patterns of SNS use among young people, i.e. Boyd (2006) who researched the use of SNSs among teenagers in the US and Vie (2007) have explored the use of Facebook amongst tertiary students. They both found that SNSs affords new ways for identity creation and literacy not previously possible in on-line communication.

This study reports on the use of a Facebook group in a German language class at a New Zealand university. Facebook was chosen because it was the most commonly used SNS amongst the age group of the students in New Zealand at the time of the study. The purpose was to integrate a computer mediated communication (CMC) tool already used by the participants in an online community in an educational environment (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Thorne, 2016). As Tufekci (2008) concluded, Facebook is not perceived as a separate learning software by the students because many students do not experience Facebook as such but as part of their daily socialising, and their social grooming. The combination of students perceiving Facebook as both personal and very familiar is an attractive feature and provides the instructor with potential opportunities to create learning contexts on Facebook which can be authentic and educational.

I will begin with a presentation of relevant literature in the field of SNSs, followed by the outline of the methodology and the design of the study, the data analysis and, finally, a discussion of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A large number of studies have looked at the usability and potential of Facebook for language learning (Aydin, 2012; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; McBride, 2009) and also at learner habits on SNS platforms (Alm, 2015; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Chen, 2015; Mitchell, 2012; Terantino & Graf, 2011; S. Wang & Vasquez, 2012, 2014). Only a few studies have looked at Facebook as part of the language curriculum (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Mills, 2011; Terantino, 2012).

Facebook with its affordances of personal profile creation can be used in L2 learning to explore other perspectives and cultures and experiment with language and self-presentation. This can move learners further towards the stage of intellectual development referred to as self-authorship (McBride, 2009, p. 51). Blattner and Fiori (2009) saw a great potential in Facebook-groups as a platform for building telecollaborative communities. They believed that a social network community could be an asset in building a community of learners and that the community could develop pragmatic competence, including knowledge of speech acts and speech functions and the ability to use language appropriately in specific contexts. Aydin (2012) contributed to the research with an extensive literature review about Facebook. Aydin looked at research on Facebook in different tertiary educational environments ranging from astronomy courses to library courses. The outcome of his review showed that Facebook and other SNSs could potentially provide valuable additional educational environments, particularly when learning about different cultures. Furthermore, Facebook increased learners' self-efficacy, motivation, self-esteem, positively changed perceptions and attitudes, reduced anxiety, and improved foreign and second language learning skills in reading and writing (p. 1101).

Another group of studies on Facebook have reported outcomes of empirical studies which explored learner habits when using Facebook (Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Alm, 2015). These studies found that students not only benefitted in language learning but also gained a better understanding of the culture of the target language when integrating SNSs into their learning. Wang and Vasques (2012), Blattner and Fiori (2011) and Alm (2015) researched language use and the choice of language type applied by students on Facebook. Wang & Vasquez (2012) used Facebook for writing tasks in a Chinese language class at a US university. They researched whether there was any difference in the quality and quantity of the written texts produced by two groups (n=18) of intermediate Chinese language learners. They found that the group of students who used Facebook for the writing task wrote more Chinese characters than the control group who did not use Facebook. They concluded that Facebook could be used as an alternative pedagogical space for L2 literacy practice outside of class, with the potential for helping L2 learners improve at least some aspects of their writing performance (p. 90).

Blattner and Fiori (2011) also found that students who used Facebook improved their production of the target language. They conducted a study with 13 undergraduate students enrolled in an intermediate Spanish culture course at a US university. Their research interest was in multiliteracy and the socio-pragmatic awareness of the participants. The participants were asked to make corrections to L2 writing pieces in authentic settings, in this case a Facebook group. Their observations confirmed that the students developed a better L2 socio-pragmatic awareness (greetings and slang). This informal socio-pragmatic awareness was also observed by Alm (2015) whose study revealed that students tended to use a more

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