Social Media: A Debilitative or Facilitative Factor in Learning English as a Foreign Language?

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Abstract

The dominating effect of social media in our daily lives has been subject to much concern in various fields of studies. Exposure to media has never been this high in the history of humanity. Implicit and explicit effects of social media have been mentioned in literature, but the main concern of the present study is to find out how it is generally used for educational purposes- learning English as a foreign language in this context. Hence, the purpose of this study is to identify students' views and perceptions about the use of social media in order to enhance their foreign language learning. The study utilized a mixed method approach. While the quantitative data were collected through the Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment developed by Dönel-Akgül, Geçikli and Sungur (2018), qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions that aimed to elicit students' use of social media for foreign language learning purposes. The participants were 122 students who were enrolled in the prep year program in the School of Foreign Languages at Adana Science and Technology University. Results are believed to provide implications on the facilitative and debilitative aspects of the social media in learning a foreign language.

Keywords: Social media, Prep year, Adult education, English as a Foreign Language

Sosyal Medya: İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenilmesinde Engelleyici mi Yoksa Kolaylaştırıcı Bir Faktör Mü?

Özet

Sosyal medyanın günlük hayatımızdaki baskın etkisi birçok çalışma alanında araştırma konusu olmuştur. İnsanlık, tarihin hiçbir döneminde bu kadar fazla medyaya maruz kalmamıştır. Sosyal medyanın açık ve örtük etkileri alan yazınında araştırılmıştır ancak bu çalışmanın asıl amacı sosyal medyanın eğitim amaçlı, özellikle de İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğrenilmesinde nasıl kullanıldığını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışmanın amacı öğrencilerin yabancı dillerini geliştirmek için sosyal medyanın kullanılması yönündeki görüş ve algılarının belirlenmesidir. Çalışmada karma desenli araştırma yöntemi kullanılmış olup, nicel veriler Dönel-Akgül, Geçikli ve Sungur (2018) tarafından geliştirilmiş olan Öğrenme Ortamı Olarak Sosyal Medya Tutum Ölçeği ile toplanmıştır. Nitel veriler ise öğrencilerin sosyal medyayı yabancı dil öğrenmede kullanma konusundaki görüşlerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlayan açık uçlu sorularla toplanmıştır. Katılımcılar, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu hazırlık sınıfına kayıtlı 122 öğrenciden oluşmuştur. Çalışmadan elde edilen sonuçların, sosyal medyanın yabancı dil öğrenmedeki kolaylaştırıcı ve engelleyici yönleri konusunda çıkarımlar sağladığı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal medya, Hazırlık sınıfı, Yetişkin eğitimi, Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce

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1. Introduction

Advances in technology in the 21st century have caused dramatic changes in people's habits of using media. One of these changes has undoubtedly been seen in the emergence and growth of social media. The generation of digital natives who are into the technology both in their social and educational lives dominates the education in the 21st century, and different educational areas have started to use popular social networking sites (Taskiran, Gumusoglu & Aydin, 2018). As Allam and Elyas (2016) stated, spread of social media technologies influenced the way people learn and communicate with each other.

In literal sense, social media refers to new forms of media which comprise interactive participation (Manning, 2014). Although the notion of social media is not described by specific scope, format, topic, audience or source, it refers to certain set of online offerings such as social networking sites, blogging and microblogging (Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Biffl, 2016). People not only communicate but also share and elicit information through social media since as Babaei, Grabowicz, Valera, Gummadi and Gomez-Rodriguez (2016) reported, social media are platforms where users generate and consume various kinds of information. In short, social media change the way of communication and interaction from traditional into digital one (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015), and address different audiences about different topics through the use of different tools (Liu & Ying, 2010). Moreover, social networking sites deliver educational outcomes, facilitate supportive relationships, and promote a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Collin, Rahilly, Richardson & Third, 2011). In this information age, one of these different contexts is foreign language environments.

English language teaching actively encompasses social media in learning and teaching activities since social media enable the application of educational theories in language teaching (Inayati, 2015). Use of social media in teaching English as a foreign language improves students' active participation for real purposes (Taskiran, Gumusoglu & Aydin, 2018). Accordingly, Yağci (2014) asserted that there is lack of awareness among students and instructors despite the potential of social media in education and suggested persuading teachers to use such technology in their classroom. Similarly, Tunde-Awe (2015) suggested that teachers should utilize technology to facilitate learning not to inhibit it since technology-supported language education is a critical area. Use of social media could influence the learning and teaching process positively. For instance, in a study conducted by Achraf (2016), use of social networks was found to improve students' speaking skills. Similarly, the study by Chotipaktanasook (2016) found that social media was effective in lowering affective filter and enhancing the motivation to communicate. Thus, social media could play a motivating role in learning a foreign language. Other studies (Nikbakht & Boshrabadi, 2015; Monica-Ariana, & Anamaria-Mirabela, 2014) revealed that social networking sites improved students' level of vocabulary in an interactive setting. Integrating social networking sites with ESL classrooms was also found to boost students' knowledge, willingness, and confidence in writing (Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012). Use of social media in writing classes also increases students' involvement (Laire, Casteleyn& Mottart, 2012). According to Alnujaidi (2017), language learners should be provided with the integration of social networking sites in their learning experience and the opportunity of using different social media without limitation of time and space. Since social media integration boosts learners' knowledge and confidence, higher education institutions should encourage the use of social networking sites and minimize the negative sides (Alnujaidi, 2017). Social networking sites have developed new chances for language learners and teachers to build interaction in authentic ways that were previously hard to achieve, motivated students to experience language in a constructive web-based learning context, and promoted students' motivation and autonomy (Chartrand, 2012). Hence, according to Alfaki and Alharthy (2014), learning via social networking sites is more effective than traditional classrooms, and new technology and internet should be utilized in order to address the needs of digital learners today. All these imply that social networking sites could be thought to pose a positive effect into the learning process both linguistically and affectively.

On the other hand, all the positive roles mentioned above do not mean that social media plays no debilitative roles in learning. To illustrate, in a study done by Dehghan, Rezvani and Fazeli (2017), students who used social networking software for learning vocabulary did not perform better than those who used traditional method because of the possible distracters such as chatting with friends, irrelevant games, listening to music, or watching clips and movies. Siddiqui and Singh (2016) also report that use of social media could cause students to lose the ability to engage themselves in face-to-face communication. Another study by Abdulahi, Samadi& Gharleghi (2014) shows that time spent on social media affects students' academic performance adversely. Mushtaq (2018) also stated that excessive use of social media led to low academic performance, waste of time and loss of concentration on studies. Moreover, in a study conducted by Mingle and Adams (2015) it was found that participants experienced negative effects such as poor grammar and spelling, late submission of assignment, less

study time and poor academic performance because of too much use of social media networks. Sudha and Kavitha (2016) also stated that most of the faculty members thought that social media had an adverse influence on students' academic performances compared with positive effects, due to lack of awareness among the students and faculty members about the suitable use of social media topics of educational interest.

All in all, social media could play both facilitative and debilitative role in educational contexts. What is important is to uncover positive effects and minimize the negative effects to benefit from it effectively. Awareness of the ways social media could be used in an academic setting and balance in the time spent on social media are critical factors that conduce efficient learning. This study aims to identify how social media is utilized for learning English as a foreign language purposes in the context of a preparatory year program at university level.

2. Methodology

Study Design: This study was descriptive in nature, and it utilized a mixed method approach. Hence, the data collection tools used in the study aimed to provide both qualitative and quantitative data for triangulation purposes. Triangulation aims to confirm study results by using qualitative and quantitative methods. Mixed method approach enables researchers to gain a better understanding of results, discover new perspectives, or develop new measurement tools (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998, p.43). According to Morse (2003), mixed method approach serves comprehension because it enables a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study. By making comparisons between the qualitative and quantitative data collection findings, researchers also have the chance to support the data obtained from one source and to comment on the similar or different findings.

3. Setting

The present study was conducted in Adana Science and Technology University, with the participation of 122 students who were enrolled in the preparatory year program at School of Foreign Languages. All the participating students attended the preparatory year program during the time the study was conducted because they were enrolled in English-medium Instruction Programs at their departments. The study was conducted in the fall semester of 2018-2019 academic year.

4. Data Collection Tools

The quantitative data were collected through the Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment developed by Dönel-Akgül, Geçikli and Sungur (2018), and the qualitative data were collected through the open-ended questions prepared by the researchers in order to support the data collected from the scale.

The Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment: The Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment deals with the use of social media as an educational context, and it elicits students' attitudes about social media from an educational perspective. The 18-item questionnaire was developed by Dönel-Akgül, Geçikli and Sungur (2018). The scale is responded on a 5-point Likert scale that includes "I totally disagree", "I disagree", "I am not sure", "I agree", and "I totally agree" options. Both positive and negative items are responded as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, but negative items are later scored reversely. Cronbach's Alpha reliability co-efficiency of the scale was found $\alpha = 0.871$.

Open-ended Questions: Three open-ended questions were utilized with a view to exploring students' experiences about social media and supporting the data obtained from the scale. The questions required students to give answers by providing some specific examples. The questions used in this part of the data collection included "Do you use social media for foreign language learning purposes? If so, how?", "What are the benefits of using social media in learning a foreign language", and "What are the potential disadvantages of using social media in foreign language learning?".

5. Data Analysis

Data collected from the Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment were analyzed using SPSS 17.0. Descriptive statistics were displayed using means, frequencies and percentages.

Qualitative data procedures were utilized for the data collected from the open-ended questions, which required inductive analysis. According to Patton (1980), "inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data

collection and analysis" (p. 306). Recommendations for qualitative data analysis process suggested by Patton (2002) were followed in the analysis of the answers given to the open-ended questions.

6. Findings

6.1. Findings from the Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment

Analysis of the qualitative data was done in two parts. While the first part demonstrated time that the students spent on the internet and social media descriptively, the second part included the mean scores of the students' responses presented with percentages.

Table 1. Time Spent on Internet and Social Media

	1 hour		2 hours		3 hours		4 hours and more	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Time spent on the internet	6	4.9	13	10.7	29	23.8	74	60.7
Time spent on social media	33	27.0	31	25.4	21	17.2	37	30.3

Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of the time that students spend on the internet and social media. Descriptive analyses results showed that students tended to spend 4 or more hours on the internet and social media daily, which indicated that students spare approximately one-fifth of their day to internet and social media.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions about Use of Social Media as an Educational Context

	ITEMS	Min.	Max.	X
17	Social media has presented a new communication space	1	5	4.12
6	Social media increases information sharing	1	5	4.04
18	I want our instructors to share more educational materials on social media	1	5	4.02
4	I can easily access educational videos through social media	1	5	3.98
15	I want a database for educational information on social media	1	5	3.87
7	I can easily find the information I need on social media	1	5	3.78
1	I can access the educational materials on social media	1	5	3.75
5	My technology literacy improves because of social media	1	5	3.74
13	I would like to contribute to the learning tools in social media	1	5	3.61
14	I use social media as a resource for my assignments	1	5	3.47
3	I think social media affects my learning positively	1	5	3.43
11	I share the educational files on social media with my friends	1	5	3.39
16	I communicate with my instructors via social media	1	5	3.39
10	I use the pictures on social media for learning purposes	1	5	3.34
8	I think the information on social media is useful	1	5	3.18
2	I trust the educational materials on social media	1	5	3.15
12	I enjoy participating the scientific discussions on social media	1	5	3.11
9	My interest in courses increases because of the materials on social media	1	5	3.04

Table 2 displays students' perceptions about the use of social media as an educational context. As it is shown in the table, students' mean scores ranged between 3.04 and 4.12, which implies their positive perception about social media as an educational context, and they seemed to use social media for educational purposes. In general sense, they believed that social media formed a new communication space and facilitated information sharing, and more than half of the students stated that they shared educational files with their friends on social media. In addition, most of the students (82%) wanted their instructors to share more educational materials on social media. Similarly, 72.1% of the students would like a database for educational information on social media. When it comes to accessing issue, students thought that they could easily access educational videos (83.6%), educational materials (68.1%) and information they needed (71.3%) on social media. Furthermore, more than half of the students tended to use social media as a resource for their assignments. However, nearly 60% of the students appeared to be undecided about trusting the educational materials on social media. Likewise, although more than half of the students believed that social media affect their learning positively, one-third of them seemed to be unsure about its positive influence on their learning. Nearly 45% of the students also appeared to be uncertain that social media increased their interest in courses. Additionally, roughly half of the students seemed to be undecided about whether the information on social media was useful or not. Nevertheless, 70.5% of the students were of the opinion that social media improved their technology literacy.

Since time spent on social media could have an impact on students' attitudes towards social media, the probable relationship between time and attitudes was also examined. Since the distribution was not found to be normal after the normality tests (sig. < .05), Spearman's rho was conducted instead of Pearson correlation so that the relationship between time and attitude could be elicited. Table 3 shows the correlation findings below:

Table 3. Correlation between Attitudes towards Social Media and Time Spent on Social Media

		Attitude towards Social Media	Time Spent on Social Media
Attitude towards Social Media	Spearman's rho	1.000	.219
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.016
	N	122	122
Time Spent on Social Media	Spearman's rho	.219	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016	
	N	122	122

Table 3 displays that there is a low level, positive relationship between attitudes towards social media and time spent on social media. Since the relationship is positive despite being at a low level (.219), it means that they increase or decrease in the same direction. The relationship was found to be statistically significant (sig. <.05).

6.2. Data obtained from the Open-ended Questions

Data obtained from the Scale of Attitude of Social Media as a Learning Environment was supported with three open-ended questions. Findings are presented with the number of citations regarding the themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis.

In the first open-ended question, the students were asked whether they benefited from social media for foreign language learning purposes. Of all the students, 93 (79%) used social media for foreign language learning purposes while 21% did not. The students were asked to name the specific social media sites they used; their answers were categorized and listed in the table below:

Table 4. *Sites used by the Participants for Language Learning Purposes*

Themes	f
International Language Learning Sites/Applications	30
Dictionary /Translation web sites and applications	21
Video channels	12
Grammar exercises web sites	9
Turkish web sites for learning English	7
Social Media Pages	6
Staged reading web sites	4

The students' answers regarding the web sites they utilized mainly focused on the international language learning sites and applications (f=30), dictionary and translation web pages and applications (f=21), and video channels f=12). Other less frequently cited responses included language learning materials in the social media pages, Turkish web sites teaching English, web sites for grammar exercises, and websites for staged reading.

The second question aimed to elicit students' views about the benefits of social media for learning a foreign language. While some students reportedly thought that social media brought little (f=5) or no benefits (f=11), other responses regarding such benefits are demonstrated in Table 5. In line with the findings obtained from the questionnaire, the participating students seemed to acknowledge that social media enable fast and easy access to learning materials (f=22). Another advantage could be related to students' finding an opportunity to communicate in English through social media (f=23). Responses also included the positive effects of using social media for learning purposes such as improving vocabulary (f=13) and making learning permanent through visual materials (f=22). A number of students also mentioned that learning was fun and interesting (f=4) with the materials in social media and those kinds of materials improved their listening skills (f=4).

Table 5. Benefits of Using Social Media for Learning a Foreign Language

Themes	*f*
Enhances communication in English with foreigners	23
Visual materials make learning permanent	22
Enables fast and easy access to learning materials	22
Improves vocabulary	13
Provides input/ helps to become familiar with the language	12
Improves listening skills	4
Makes learning fun and interesting	4

The last open-ended question aimed to explore students' views regarding the potential disadvantages of using social media for foreign language learning purposes. Some students reportedly were not sure or knowledgeable about such disadvantage (f=14) while some others thought no disadvantages could be mentioned (f=15). Other responses are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Disadvantages of Using Social Media for Language Learning Purposes

Themes	*f*
Unreliable information	37
Too many distractions	14
Time-consuming	8
Exposure to bad words	6
Focusing problem	6
Incorrect translation	5
Too much unnecessary information	4
Bad accents / wrong pronunciation	4
Screen addiction	2
No permanent learning	2
Spelling mistakes	1
No speaking practice	1
No transfer to real life	1
No interaction	1

The most frequently mentioned disadvantage was finding unreliable information in social media (f=37), which requires confirmation of the information found from other sources. The second most frequently mentioned disadvantage was having too many distractions in the screen (f=14), which is related to another theme stating that focusing is a problem (f=6). A number of students also stated that using social media for learning was time-consuming (f=8) and caused screen addiction (f=2). Incorrect translation (f=5), exposure to bad words (f=6), spelling mistakes (f=1), and lack of interaction (f=1) were the other factors mentioned by the participants.

7. Discussion

This study aimed to explore preparatory year students' views and perceptions about the use of social media in order to enhance their foreign language learning. The study conducted with 122 preparatory year students provided insights from students' points of views from both qualitative and quantitative aspects.

All the participating students were found to spend at least 4 hours looking at the screen for internet and social media use. Mao (2014) also found that more than half of the students reportedly logged onto their social media accounts many times a day. The present study identified a positive, significant relationship between social media use and attitudes towards social media for learning purposes. Al Mubarak (2016) claimed that use of social media affected students' knowledge, attitude and learning attainment positively. However, time spent on social media might or might not be related to using it for learning purposes. For instance, Junco (2012) reported that time spent on social media was significantly negatively related to college students' GPA, and was weakly related to time spent preparing for classes. Additionally, Rouis, Limayem and Salehi-Sangari (2011) found that excessive use of social media caused low academic performance among extroverted students while those who were more self-regulated controlled their presence on social media more effectively.

The participants reportedly shared educational materials in social media environments and wanted their teachers to share those kinds of materials with them. Studies show that sometimes there is no substitute for face-to-face teaching, and the social interaction is seen extremely valuable (Hundberger, 2009). From the teacher's point of view, traditional teaching enables teachers to be aware of students' state of well-being in general and how they cope psychologically. Classroom teaching is thus hard to replace, but supplementing it with virtual teaching materials is believed to work well (Hundberger, 2009). Students' interest in the use of social media and internet by their teacher seems to be a practice worth considering and implementing. According to Bakar (2009), e-learning or web-based learning environment is an evolution in education and English language learning. Similarly, Billett (2002) argued that ubiquitous nature of e-learning indicates that much of learning takes place outside the formal education. Therefore, informal learning is accomplished in combination with formal learning. As suggested by Gikas and Grant (2013), mobile computing devices, and thus social media in this context, could serve as a bridge between formal and informal learning.

As reported by Castells (2000), the internet has ushered in unprecedented ubiquity of access to information and services, acting as the engine of the information age. In line with this view, both qualitative and quantitative data findings indicated that students acknowledged the fast and easy access to learning materials in social media. They also mentioned that educational videos were available for them almost everywhere. Traxler (2007) also reported that students emphasized the advantages of using mobile devices because they could access, upload and post course content anywhere.

On the other hand, majority of the participants stated that they did not always find the information on the internet reliable. This finding was parallel in both qualitative and quantitative results. Some of the students reported that they needed to confirm the information they found in social media. Research on the use of internet was mainly based on the expansion of available resources for teachers and students, and the studies did not provide an analysis of the actual use and outcome (Hatakka & Lagsten, 2012). However, the actual use and benefit of the learning materials on the internet and social media should be investigated thoroughly because as the findings of the present study indicated, despite the large amount of information available on the internet for learning purposes, students were not quite sure about whether it really increased interest in courses. In addition, a number of participating students mentioned the distracting elements that caused difficulty in focusing on the task.

Students were found to benefit from various internet sites and their applications for learning English. Majority of the responses included international language learning websites that provided multilanguage options. Other responses included translation sites, Turkish teachers' instructing English, and language learning exercises. The students were found to think that the specific learning platforms they used on the internet enhanced their reading skills and vocabulary knowledge, provided authentic input, and made their learning more permanent through visuals. Archambault et al. (2010) also reported that mobile devices and social media tools created a personalized, authentic learning experience for students. It is generally known that learning becomes more enjoyable when students are engaged in mobile learning tasks. Hence, a number of students mentioned that learning in social media was fun and interesting. Fun side of online learning is often largely unrecognized because these sites are considered to be centered on leisure activities (Roy Williams, 2008). By providing a variety of activities, social web sites create an attractive atmosphere for learners from diverse interests.

Finally, potential disadvantages from the students' views included having too many distractions on the screen, difficulty in finding reliable information, and time-consuming nature of social media pages. Mao (2014) also reported that although more than half of the students believed that social media encouraged sharing, made learning fun, meaningful and interactive, a smaller group found using social media distracting, time-consuming, and good for socializing but not for learning. Walsh et al. (2013) reported that appealing nature of media causes students to devote less time to academic activities, to distract their attention and thus to decrease their performance and efficiency. Hence, it is quite important for students to gain the habit of using social media for educational purposes and to benefit from various materials available on the media.

8. Conclusion

Social media could be both a facilitative and debilitative factor in learning English as a foreign language. Given the advances of technology, instructors should integrate technology-supported tools in their teaching process. They should prepare appropriate contexts that encourage effective use of social media and avoid excessive use that could lead to addiction, distraction, or low performance. As Tantarangsee (2016) suggested, teachers should prepare suitable tasks that motivate students to bring, use and produce information in social media. Students should also be trained to select reliable sources while using the media for educational purposes. This could be achieved through the integration of critical thinking course into the curriculum. Awareness should also be raised among students about the probable risks of social media. This study was conducted among university students. Other studies could investigate social media use among high school or secondary school students. Future studies at university contexts could aim to gauge students' strategies for reaching credible information while using social media.

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