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EXPLORING EFL LEARNERS' USE OF WEB 2.0 TOOLS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS*

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Abstract

The shift from 'read only web' to 'read and write' web has substantially changed the practices in the field of language education depending on the enormous potential of Web 2.0 technologies on language learning. However, understanding to what extent the language learners are aware of and proficient in using Web 2.0 tools remains a key consideration. Reporting on some preliminary results from a larger research project, this study aims to investigate the use of Web 2.0 tools by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in their personal and educational life. Chosen through convenience sampling, the participants include 572 university level EFL learners. The data was collected through questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics. Suggesting a greater diversity with regard to the range and the proficiency in the use of Web 2.0 tools, the findings show that while established technologies such as searching for information or social networks are very popular among preparatory EFL learners, newer technologies including self-publishing and content creation tools are used by a rather small portion of the students.

Keywords: *EFL learners, Web 2.0, Information and Communication Technologies, Perception.*

YABANCI DİL OLARAK İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRENİCİLERİNİN WEB 2.0 ARAÇLARI KULLANIMI: ÖN BULGULAR

Özet

'Salt-okunur' internet ağından 'okunabilir-yazılabilir' internet ağına geçiş ile birlikte birçok eğitimci ve öğrenci ikinci kuşak internet ağının (Web 2.0) sunduğu araçları deneyimlemeye başlamıştır. İkinci dil edinimi de bu araçların deneyimlendiği alanlardan biridir. Daha büyük ölçekli bir araştırma projesinin ilk bulgularının rapor edildiği bu çalışma, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrencilerinin Web 2.0 araçları kullanımını incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Çalışmaya, toplam 572 üniversite hazırlık programı İngilizce öğrencisi katılmıştır. Anketler aracılığıyla toplanan veriler, betimsel istatistikler kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Web 2.0 araçlarının çeşitliliği ve kullanım oranı ile ilgili olarak büyük ölçüde çeşitlilik ortaya koyan bu çalışmanın bulguları, Hazırlık programı İngilizce öğrencilerinin bilgi edinme araçlarını sıklıkla kullanmalarına karşın kişisel yayın ve içerik oluşturma teknolojilerini aktif olarak kullanmadıklarını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, Web 2.0, Algı, Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojiler*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of new millennium, one influential assertion in the field of education is that a distinct generation of learners, often dubbed as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) along with other labels as “Net generation” (Jones, Ramanau, Cross, & Healing, 2010) and “Millennials” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) is entering into the educational setting. This generation is said to have been bathed in bits and bytes since birth (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) and they have a natural aptitude in using information and communication technologies (ICT) (Tapscott, 2009). It is assumed that this new generation of learners have a craving for technology to be a crucial constituent of their education (Philip, 2007), and they are characterized by such attributes as desire for immediate access to information, being emphatic in information seeking and comfortable at multitasking (G. Kennedy et al., 2007). The claims have gone further to make a divide between contemporary university level students and educators that are so-called as “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001). Based on this divide, it has been recommended that teachers should revise their instructional practices to meet the demands of this new generation of learners.

However, recent research conducted with so-called digital natives has challenged, to a great extent, to such generalized assumptions (Gu, Zhu, & Guo, 2013; Helsper & Enyon, 2010; G. Kennedy et al., 2007; Thinyane, 2010) directing the attention of researchers to the ICT use by contemporary learners as the “current students and teachers might have more complex mix of skills and experience with new technologies” (Kennedy et al., 2007 p. 518).

Given the fact that technology integration is a ubiquitous trend in both formal and informal language learning contexts, exploring students’ engagement with ICT tools within the field of language education remains as a key consideration (Kenning, 2007). Emergence of Web 2.0 in particular has substantially changed the course delivery, leading a number of language practitioners to experiment with Web 2.0 various tools depending on their potentials for fostering language instruction (Wang & Vasquez, 2012). However, it is undeniable that impact of ICT depends on how end users, language learners, use it (Gu et al., 2013). Undoubtedly, a better understanding of learners’ ways of using ICT instead of presupposing them as natural users of technology as claimed for their generation would be conducive to catering for the students (Thompson, 2013). Realizing this, researchers have recently carried out studies focusing on the use of web tools by EFL learners in both daily and language learning activities (Hsu, 2016; Lai & Gu, 2011; Zeng, 2015), results of which imply that further research is needed into the ways of technology use in different student populations and learning settings.

The research reported here is a part of an ongoing project that ultimately aims to thoroughly investigate digital characteristics of EFL learners, their patterns of ICT use and acceptance of technology. Including the preliminary analysis, this paper reports only a part of the research focusing on the findings about EFL learners’ utilization of Web 2.0 and their preferences for exploiting new technologies as learning tools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Web 2.0: An Overview

Coined by O’Reilly (2005) and defined, in its broadest sense, as second generation of web tools facilitating communication, collaboration and information

sharing, the term Web 2.0 is defined diversely in the relevant literature. Considering Web 2.0 as a new version of extant internet technology, Warschauer and Grimes (2007), for instance, state that Web 2.0 is the representative of “changes in the communicative uses of the underlying Web platform” (p. 2). Focusing on the interactive nature of Web 2.0, Tu, Blocher, and Ntoruru, (2008) offer the definition as “a Web technology that aims to enhance creativity, information sharing and collaboration among users” (p. 336). Referring to the emerging nature of applications, Zhang (2009) regards Web 2.0 as a loose concept incorporating a wide array of captivating technologies currently in the period of development. Song (2010) provides a comprehensive definition: “Web 2.0 represents many things: it is a set of different techniques, a new generation of software, and a new set of business models, which all facilitate new social and expressive practices for contemporary Internet users” (p.269).

Though definitions vary, there is a consensus that sharing, interactivity, production along with connectivity are among the distinctive properties of Web 2.0 tools, and these features enable the users to move from passive consumption of information as in the case of Web 1.0 to active contribution through creating content, sharing and interacting with other users.

Even though it would be difficult to make a concise list of Web 2.0 tools due to ever expanding nature of web, it is still possible to name some core technologies that most of the language practitioners are familiar with (for a review of Web 2.0 technologies, see Conole & Alevizou, 2010). Table 1 provides a list of major Web 2.0 tools with short descriptions.

Table 1: Core Web 2.0 tools with brief descriptions

Web 2.0 tool	
Social networking sites	These are the websites with a profile of the user allowing them to create and customize a personal webpage. As their names indicate, they help users to establish and explore new social networks through enabling users to locate other users with similar interests or a common background.
Social bookmarking	These applications (e.g. del.icio.us, Digg, etc.) help users store, categorize and share their internet bookmarks through tagging them with keywords of their choice. Users can also subscribe to feeds connected to certain tags.
File sharing	Incorporating wide-ranging applications, file sharing within the context of Web 2.0 refers to networks that facilitate direct transfers of files among users.
Google docs	Incorporating an online word processor, spreadsheet and presentation editor, Google Docs allows users to develop content, store and share it instantly and collaborate in real time.
Podcasts	Using syndicated internet feeds, podcasting is the distribution of audio or video files. Users subscribe to individual feeds through an aggregator which downloads the updated content constantly for later use.
Blogs	Simply defined as customizable personal websites storing user’s entries in a reverse chronological order, blogs facilitate interaction through <i>comment</i> option and enable users to upload rich media and link to other websites.
Wikis	Typically organised in an ad-hoc manner and facilitating extensive use of hyperlinks and search routes, wikis are collaborative websites that allow any users with access to contribute.

The contemporary language learners as claimed to be digital natives are considered typical Web 2.0 users. Additionally, it has been put forward in many publications that Web 2.0 tools with their participatory and interactive properties match well with the thinking and learning characteristics of current EFL learners (Lai & Gu, 2011; Zeng, 2015). The following section presents the literature about Web 2.0 tools in connection with language learning.

2.2 Web 2.0 And Language Learning

The compatibility between current language learning theories and attributes of Web 2.0 implies that emerging online tools possess a substantial capacity to enhance language learning, particularly within self-directed learning contexts (Lai & Gu, 2011; Motteram & Sharma, 2009). This understanding has led many language practitioners to experiment with Web 2.0 tools to introduce their students to state-of-the-art L2 opportunities in out-of-class context (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Kessler, 2009; Şahin Kızıl, 2015). In much of the research in this line, technology is often presented as a solution to the problems that arise due to the very nature of classroom based language learning. Alongside the basic language skills, potentials of Web 2.0 tools have been investigated in many other areas such as learner autonomy (Alm, 2009), self-regulation strategies (Hsiao, Tsai, Lin, & Lin, 2012) and motivation (McCarty, 2009).

A closer look at the literature on Web 2.0 in language learning reveals that recurrent themes regarding the main attributes of Web 2.0 technologies appear as facilitating language learning. Crook (2008) identifies four main themes surrounding Web 2.0 technologies that could be extended to language learning as well. Accordingly, the first facilitating aspect of Web 2.0 results from its being open to *collaboration*. Depending on the social aspects which ease the community building and foster user participation and interaction, utilization of Web 2.0 tools widens the opportunities for target language use in real communicative settings and learn collaboratively (Arslan & Şahin Kızıl, 2010; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). The second feature of Web 2.0 supporting language learning is related to the *literacy* which refers to novel ways of self-expression and presentation (Crook, 2008). A number of studies have reported positive outcomes in Web 2.0 integrated teaching practices linking the findings to the multiple modes of self-expression Web 2.0 offers (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007; Sun, 2009). The next facilitating aspect of Web 2.0 in language learning is *publication*. It is argued that content creation and online self-publishing made easier through Web 2.0 broaden the range of possibilities for target language production (Sun, 2009; Şahin Kızıl, 2015; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). Furthermore, the availability of audience owing to open-to-anyone nature of Web 2.0 leads language learners to be attentive in preparing and editing their linguistic production (Arslan & Şahin Kızıl, 2010). The last theme surrounding Web 2.0 as a supporting environment for language learners is related with the *inquiry* opportunities. Since Web 2.0 offers a myriad of information sources from various authorities, it renders novel ways of individual research possible. These online sources in textual, audio and visual modes provide learners with authentic target language, which fosters the language development (Alm, 2008). Moreover, annotated or hyperlinked language resources available in abundance in Web 2.0 tools are claimed to bring about effective search of input explanations, “thus increasing the possibility of input being processed and internalized” (Zeng, 2015 p.44). Overall, Web 2.0

technologies are considered to be promising in supporting and enhancing language learning practices through having revolutionary impacts on language learners (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007).

One noteworthy point implied in the literature sketched out above is that most of the studies are experimentally designed and report what could happen when Web 2.0 is introduced and put into action in language learning. However, there is also a need for focusing on the settings where language learners are not intervened through carefully planned treatments (Zeng, 2015). Would their being a part of so called digital native generation necessarily make them natural users of current technologies?

Acknowledging that contemporary language learners might have different access to and engagement with technology, it has been recently suggested that potentials of Web 2.0 technologies on language learning and their being accessible for learners is not a guarantee of technology acceptance on the part of the EFL learners (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). Benini and Murray (2013) point out that learners might not have a good grasp of available options in technology-enhanced learning since digital nativeness might not be world-wide phenomena, and they call for research on the use of technology tools by different students populations. The present study, in this regard, is an attempt to explore and understand EFL learners' choices and proficiency in using Web 2.0 tools in their personal and educational lives. More specifically, this study sets out to investigate the following research questions:

- (1) How do EFL learners engage with Web 2.0 tools for personal purposes?
- (2) What is the level of EFL learners' proficiency in using Web 2.0 tools?
- (3) What are the choices of Web 2.0 tools by EFL learners for language learning activities?

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper reports preliminary findings attained through initial analysis of the data from a large scale investigation on digital characteristics of EFL learners. Following a quantitative approach, this study aimed at exploring EFL learners' practices with ICT tools and their justification of choices within a descriptive research design.

3.1 Research Setting And Participants

Carried out at the School of Foreign Languages, Firat University in 2015, this study makes use of the responses of a total of 572 EFL learners accessed through the first round of data collection. The participants were all university level EFL learners attending an intensive English preparatory program which aims to equip them with the language skills required to pursue their education in their respective fields of study. Total hours of instruction were 20 per week and at the time of the study, the school was offering a-two hours of computer assisted language learning class where students were practicing what they had learned through a commercial, course specific learning management system in a computer lab. 71.9% of the respondents were male (n=411) and the rest (28.1%) were female (n=161). Participants' average age was 19.7 years (SD= 1.50), and they were majoring in different sub-fields of engineering (i.e. computer, electronic, environmental, software and civil engineering).

3.2 Data Collection

In order to collect data on the use of Web 2.0 tools by EFL learners, a questionnaire adapted from the relevant literature (G. Kennedy et al., 2007; G. Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008; Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011) was distributed to the learners. The participants completed the paper-based survey during their class hours and submitted them to the researcher upon completion. They were informed about the voluntary-basis of the study and privacy and confidentiality issues in advance. Participants were not offered any reward in kind or monies. The results reported in this paper were composed of the responses to four sections described below.

The language of the questionnaire was the participants' L1. With the purpose of precluding any misconception in the responses, Turkish version of the overall questionnaire was produced through a *translation and back translation* process which involves several rounds of translation of the target material through consulting an external reviewer to test the equality of the original and translated versions (Dörnyei, 2010). The questionnaire used for this preliminary report included 4 sections. The first part was about demographic information (age, gender, departments they have enrolled etc.). In the second part, the participants were asked about ownership and access to various ICT tools, which is thought to provide a background for the use of Web 2.0. The next part asked about the perceived proficiency of the participants in using Web 2.0 technologies. A total of 12 Web 2.0 applications each placed on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 were presented to the respondents. 1 in the scale was for *don't know it*, 2 for *not knowledgeable*, 3 for *know it but not using*, 4 for *knowledgeable* and 5 for *very knowledgeable*. The participants were required to specify their proficiency regarding the use of given Web 2.0 tools. The final part of the questionnaire collected information about the use of Web 2.0 tools for English learning purposes. This section consisted 15 items representing various Web 2.0 tools. The literature on computer assisted language learning (CALL) reporting the tools being effective for EFL learners (Benito-Ruiz, 2009; Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Zeng, 2015) was taken as the base in deciding which tools to include in this section. The participants were asked which of the tools presented they were using for learning English and they were required to check all that apply.

Before its final dissemination to the sample, the items in the questionnaire were pilot tested with 21 students in the same research setting, and the items were revised and rephrased in accordance with the pilot test results. The survey data attained through the final administration of the questionnaire were analysed through SPSS 22.0. As the questionnaire was mainly descriptive, the techniques of descriptive analyses were performed instead of inferential statistics. Results are presented in the following section.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Ownership and access

The first part of the analysis explored ownership and the use of ICT tools in connection with accessing the Internet. Regarding the ownership, not surprisingly almost all of the participants (95.6%) had unlimited access to a mobile phone, 62.3% reported owning a laptop, 64.2% had unrestricted access to a portable media player. However, the percentages of ownership decreases regarding the access to Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) (37.2%) and game console (20.4%). These findings mirror surveys

conducted in various research settings (Jones et al., 2010; G. Kennedy et al., 2008). When they were asked about their preferences for internet access, as shown in Figure 1, mobiles were placed on the top of the list of ICT tools (46.1%), which is followed by laptops (28.7%) as the second most frequently used tool for internet access.

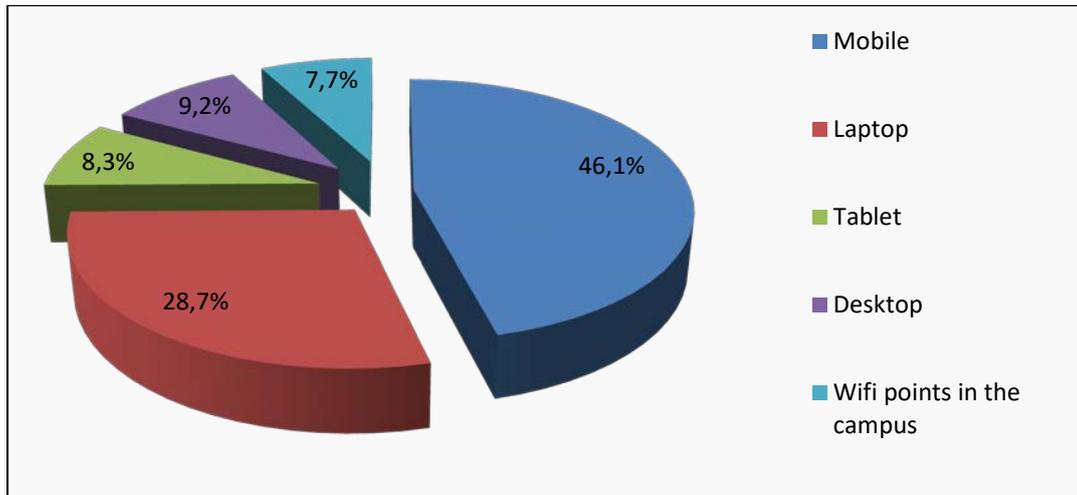


Figure 1: Main ICT tools to access internet

The next question asked respondents to specify the purposes they use the Internet for, which could provide insights into EFL learners’ engagement with Web 2.0 tools for personal purposes. Figure 2 displays the results.

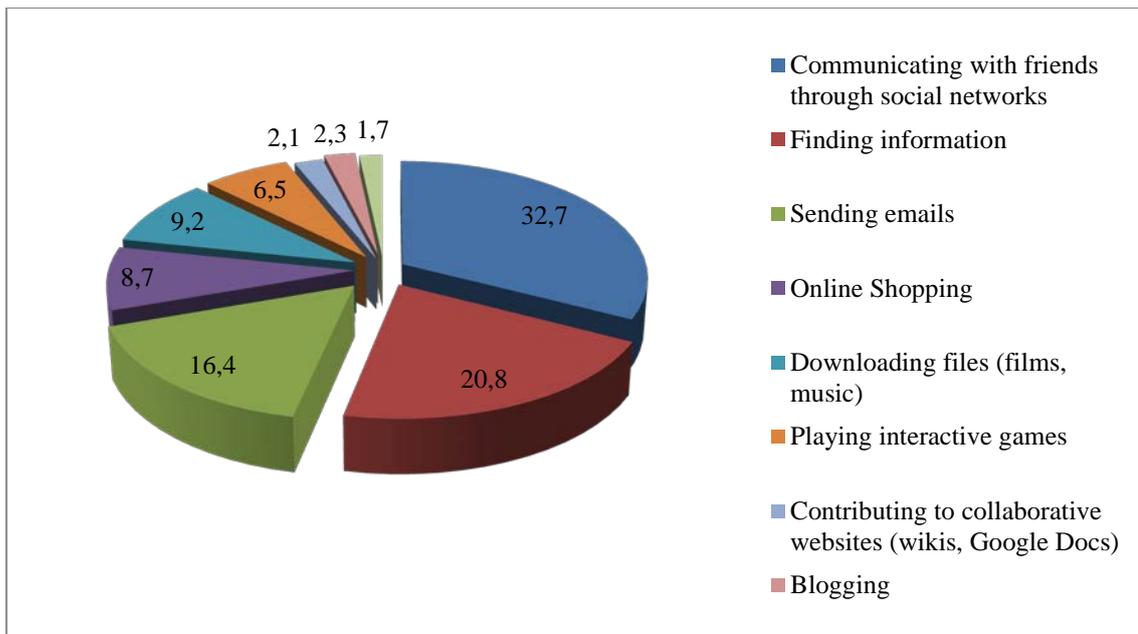


Figure 2: Web 2.0 based activities

As shown in Figure 2, the most popular use of web among EFL learners in this study is interacting with other people through social networking sites (32.7%), a popular Web 2.0 tool. Searching web to find facts is also placed at higher ranks in the list of participants’ online activities (20.8%). This is followed by sending emails (16.4%) and downloading various media (9.2%). Popularity of social networking sites and treating web as an information source have been reported in previous research as well

(Jones et al., 2010; D. M. Kennedy & Fox, 2013; G. Kennedy et al., 2008). One noteworthy finding is that such typical phenomenon of Web 2.0 as blogs (2.3%), wikis (2.1%) and podcasts (1.7%) are the least used tools among EFL learners.

4.2 Perceived Proficiency on Web 2.0 Tools

The third part of the survey aimed at finding out the extent to which EFL learners regard themselves as proficient in using an array of Web 2.0 tools. Participants responded a total of 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 represents *do not know* and 5 represents *very knowledgeable*. Each item in this part stands for a separate Web 2.0 tool. Decision on what Web 2.0 tools to include in the instrument was nourished by the literature about the integration of Web 2.0 tools into language learning contexts. The tools mostly highlighted as useful for language learners (Benito-Ruiz, 2009; Butler, 2015; Karpati, 2009; Thomas, 2009; Wang & Vasquez, 2012) were added to the scale. Table 2 presents the results. For ease of interpretation, rating scales have been collapsed down combining *do not know* and *not knowledgeable*, and *knowledgeable* and *very knowledgeable*.

Table 2: Perceived proficiency on Web 2.0 tools

Web 2.0 Tools	Do not know	Know it but not using	Knowledgeable
Social Networking Sites	-	4.7%	95.3%
Blog	52.5%	27.4%	20.1%
Wiki	58.8%	23.1%	18.1%
Google Docs	43.3%	18.9%	37.8%
Podcast	63%	14.4%	12.6%
Chatbot	41.7%	22.5%	35.8%
3D Virtual World	12.3%	26.1%	61.6%
Social Bookmarking	43.6%	41.1%	15.3%
Online Games (with real players)	8.2%	11.4%	80.4%
File Sharing	-	6.3%	93.6%
Commenting on multimedia	2.1%	23.4%	75.5%
RSS	38.9%	32.7%	28.4%

As seen in Table 1, social networking sites (95.3%) are the domain in which the highest level of proficiency was reported by the participants. File sharing (93.6%) and playing online games against real players (80.4%) are also among Web 2.0 tools with which the respondents self-reported higher level of proficiency. The other Web 2.0 based applications at which participants considered themselves skilled are making comments on shared media (75.5%) and virtual world (61.6%). However, the scene drastically changes when the content creation aspect of Web 2.0 is taken into consideration. Drawing from the discourse on digital natives suggesting that contemporary learners are not inclined just to consume information but desire to actively participate into the process of information and knowledge creation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), it would be expected that the participants in this study would be proficient users of such technologies as blogs, wikis or google docs. However, the results indicated that only one out of five students are able to use blogging (20.1%); more than half of them have no idea about what a podcast (63%) or a wiki (58.8%) is; and nearly half of them do not know anything about google docs (43.3%) and social

bookmarking (43.6%) let alone their being frequent users of these tools as claimed for them. This finding echoes the statement by Jones et al., (2010) “some of the key technological tools that are identified with Web 2.0 are only used by minorities of [digital native] students” (p. 729).

4.3 Web 2.0 Tools for Language Learning

The final section of the survey was about choices of Web 2.0 tools by EFL learners for out-of-class language learning activities. Students were asked to respond to a list of Web 2.0 applications that have occupied a large space in recent CALL literature. Figure 3 illustrates the findings.

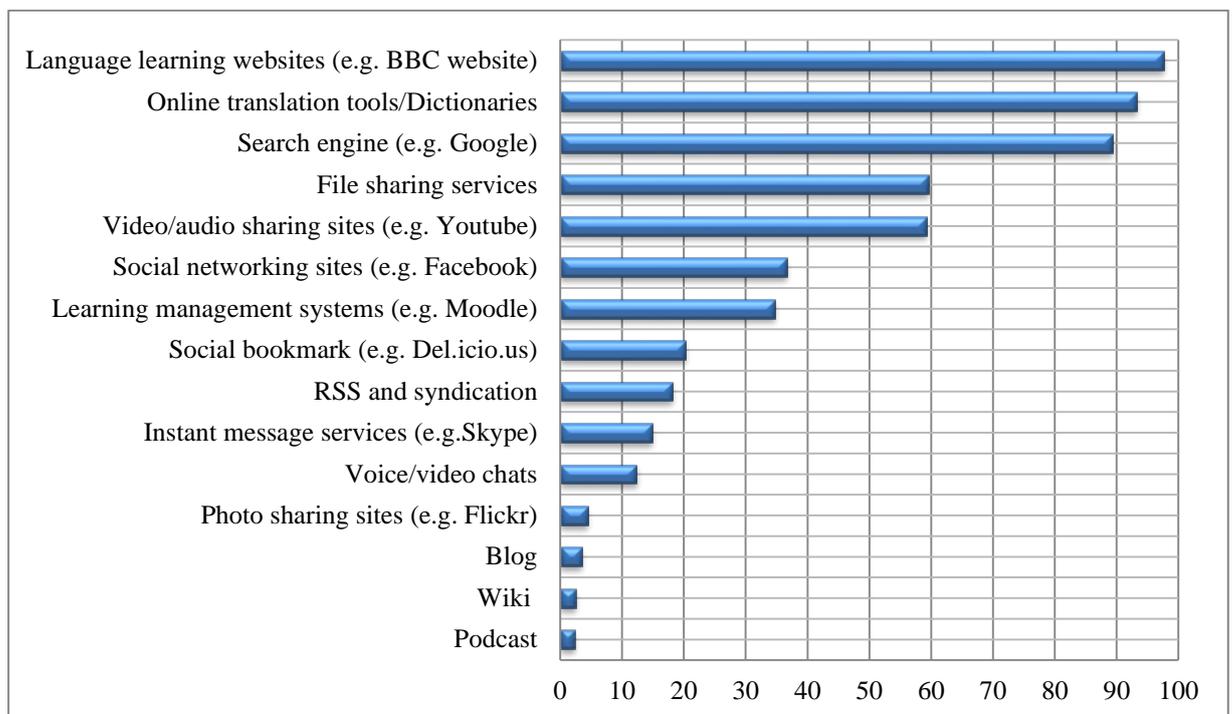


Figure 3: Choices of EFL learners for learning English through Web 2.0

As is seen in Figure 3, websites offering language learning materials are the most popular tool for language learning among EFL learners. The higher rates of using information obtaining tools (i.e. online dictionaries and search engines) lend further support to the aforementioned findings that current EFL learners are not intensively engaged in knowledge creation process. The comparison between participants' use of Web 2.0 for general purposes and for language learning purposes points out that learners do not have good grasp of the potentials of some Web 2.0 tools in language learning as the use of social networks for general purposes is quite frequent while it is utilized at a moderate level for language learning. Similar conclusions were reached by Zeng (2015) who notes that “such usage patterns are due to lack of access to or knowledge about emerging online technologies” (p.129). The underuse of self-publishing tools among EFL learners could be linked to the conclusion that “Web 2.0 technologies have not transformed them into more socially interactive learners of English” (p.130).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Glancing over the issue of digital nativity which is still a matter of ongoing debate, this study set out to find out EFL learners use of Web 2.0 tools both for daily and educational purposes. The findings of the study indicate that EFL learners participating in this study are not frequent and proficient users of Web 2.0 tools, which contradicts the claims often made for current generation of learners (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2005; Tapscott, 2009). While established technologies such as searching for information or social networks are very frequently used by EFL learners in their daily lives, newer technologies including self-publishing and content creation tools are used by a rather small portion of the students.

From a holistic perspective, when these findings are linked to the relevant literature (Jones et al., 2010; G. Kennedy et al., 2007; Margaryan et al., 2011; Thompson, 2013; Zeng, 2015), a noteworthy conclusion to be reached is that there is a great diversity in the range of technology use among the members of digital generation. Therefore, language practitioners should be cautious in overgeneralising the distinctive features attributed to contemporary learners based on assumptions about technology proficiency or preferences. The overall results indicate that use of Web 2.0 tools is not widespread among EFL learners, even majority of them do not have any idea on certain tools. This implies that cautious and informed steps should be taken prior to any decision on integrating any of the Web 2.0 tools into instructional settings. It is recommended that EFL teachers provide necessary scaffolding when planning language courses requiring learners to use Web 2.0 tools. Despite the growing body of literature emphasizing the advantages of using Web 2.0 with language learners, this study, in line with Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott and Kennedy (2012), suggests that considerable efforts should be undertaken by language teachers in helping students perceive the value of Web 2.0 tools in language learning and acquire necessary academic skills.

The findings of this present investigation, however, should be interpreted in the light of some limitations. First, relatively small sample size makes it difficult to draw large-scale generalizations out of the findings. Additionally, idiosyncrasy of the research setting (i.e. Turkish EFL context) and participants (i.e. first year university level EFL learners) make the generalizability of the findings to the other settings and non-college bound learners limited. Future studies conducted in different settings with larger EFL learner populations could contribute to a complete understanding of the use of Web 2.0 tools among language learners. Finally, self-report nature of data collection instrument remains a limitation, which calls for further research investigating the actual use of Web 2.0 tools by EFL learners.

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