

Facebook as an Interactional Environment in the Foreign Language Learning Context

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Abstract

Today, Facebook, as a sample of Web 2.0 and social media tool, has considerable effects on communication and interaction among individuals. Related literature also suggests that Facebook can be an educational tool in the learning and teaching contexts. Considered that the nature of foreign language learning directly relates to interactions among learners, how Facebook can be used as an interactional tool among foreign language learners should be clarified in relation to current theories and hypotheses. Thus, this paper discusses the role of Facebook as an interactional tool in a theoretical framework. For this purpose, the study first introduces the role of interaction in the foreign language teaching and learning contexts. Then, it focuses on the relationship between Facebook and interaction in the mentioned processes in the scope of theoretical background. The paper concludes that Facebook is an ideal platform for interaction in the foreign language learning and teaching contexts. Finally, the paper ends with recommendations for target groups and researchers.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; interaction; Facebook

Introduction

Interaction in the foreign language learning and teaching contexts has a crucial role, as it is a provider for linguistic forms and functions (Long, 1990) and the core of communication for learning a foreign language (Brown, 1994). As it relates to the personal and motivational development of learners, it enhances self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, it facilitates the reception and production processes, cooperation and collaboration among learners and develops opportunities to obtain linguistic knowledge. It is also evident that Web 2.0 tools have considerable effects on the foreign language learning and teaching processes. In a broader perspective, they develop both receptive and productive skills (Godwin-Jones, 2008; Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008), communicative competence (Borau et al., 2009; McBride, 2009), cultural awareness (Sykes et al., 2008) and the use of authentic materials (McBride, 2009). Within this scope, basic language skills can be supported by web 2.0 tools and social media, as they enforce language learners to communicate. They also increase foreign language learners' cultural awareness, provide lexically, syntactically and semantically appropriate content and facilitate creating this content. To conclude, it can be inferred that the use of social media and Web 2.0 tools constitute a considerable place the foreign language learning and teaching processes.

Among those tools, Facebook as an interactional tool provides significant benefits in the foreign language learning and teaching contexts and its role is quite valuable due to several reasons. For instance, it provides synchronous or asynchronous learning opportunities (Kabilan et al., 2010), supports different types of interaction such as instant messaging or video sharing. These facilities enhance learners' motivation and create positive attitudes toward learning and teaching process. It also provides authentic materials, facilitates the development of cross-cultural relationships (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). However, given that interaction constitutes a significant place in the foreign language foreign language learning and teaching processes and that Facebook is an efficient tool for interaction, how Facebook as an interactional tool contributes to the mentioned processes is not clear. In other words, the use of Facebook as an interaction tool in the learning and teaching processes needs to be

clarified in relation to current theories and hypotheses. Thus, the current paper first aims to discuss Facebook and an interactional tool and to draw a theoretical framework for the use of Facebook in interaction in the scope of language learning and current theories and hypotheses.

Facebook as an Interactional Environment and Tool

Facebook as an interaction tool and environment is suitable for both communication and interaction in the foreign language teaching and learning processes (Aydın, 2012) due to several reasons. First, given that foreign language learning requires interaction among learners and teachers, Facebook supports social interaction opportunities among users (Pempek et al., 2009) and improves social presence (Bateman & Willems, 2012). Second, interaction with a large number of people via Facebook enables users to collaborate and share feelings and ideas instantly (Balçıklanlı, 2015). Last, Facebook supports interesting and different ways of interaction (Acquisti & Gross, 2006) such as instant messaging or video sharing. These different types have a positive outcome for not only individuals but also the community (Ellison, 2008). However, related literature suggests that the use of Facebook may bring several disadvantages in the scope of language learning. For instance, while it is designed to increase interaction among users, privacy constitutes a significant problem (Debatin et al., 2009). Interaction via Facebook may also be insufficient to create fresh relationships (Dwyer et al., 2007). Moreover, it can raise the volume, origin and confusion on communication (Chen & Lee, 2013). Facebook can also cause a lack of courage and self-esteem that are necessary for learning and real interaction (Mathias, 2011). To conclude, while Facebook may cause potential problems, within the foreign language learning and teaching processes, it has numerous advantages. In other words, interaction via Facebook improves receptive and productive skills, communicative competence and cultural awareness and provides authentic materials. It is also obvious that it contributes to flexibility, authenticity, participation and collaboration. However, before using Facebook as an interactional tool and environment in the foreign language teaching and learning processes, it seems necessary to raise awareness regarding the theoretical framework of the utilization of Facebook.

Theoretical Framework the Use of Facebook in Interaction

Current literature suggests that Facebook an interaction tool may relate to several hypotheses. These are listed as the *Interaction Hypothesis*, *Social Interaction Hypothesis* and *Conversational Interaction Hypothesis*. Below, how Facebook relates to the mentioned hypotheses is clarified.

According to the *Interaction Hypothesis*, the proficiency of language learners is correlated with interaction and communication. In this sense, Long (1996) defines interaction as a connector of input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention and output in productive ways. In other words, an active participant can connect forms and structures, produce output as a result of this interaction. Moreover, Ellis (1991) underlines the importance of interaction in language learning and categorizes them into two categories: *Comprehensible input* and *Negotiation of meaning*. Negotiation of meaning enforces language learners to produce comprehensible input and language learners can modify the on-going context both conversationally and linguistically (Mackey, 1999). In conclusion, the *Interaction Hypothesis* positively supports the use of Facebook during interaction in terms of providing both comprehensible input and communication opportunities.

According to the *Social Interaction Hypothesis*, humans are related to a community. Their behaviors are originated from social interaction with the group or individual (Mead, 1934). Thus, an individual who becomes a participant of social interaction improves learning and thinking skills (Labinowicz, 1980) because social interaction is the natural proceed of group life (Verma, 2010). Enhancing social interaction among learners may also affect learners' cognitive skills (Peterson & McCabe, 1994). For instance, when a learner participates in a conversation, she both improves her social skills and accomplishes her needs. Moreover, meaningful social interaction is crucial for language learners as it

fosters natural and authentic conditions for language acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Long, 1996). Social interaction also enables language learners to convey the message in the target language and to use it as an input for the language acquisition process (Hatch, 1978). To sum up, the *Social Interaction Hypothesis* relates to the use of Facebook, as Facebook becomes a supporter of meaningful social interaction that is the basic element of human life.

According to the *Conversational Interaction Hypothesis*, the foreign language learning and second language acquisition processes are based on the negotiation of meaning between language learners and interlocutors. In this sense, *Conversational Interaction* supports the notion that it promotes language acquisition process (Ellis, 1991) and enables language learners to create connections between the learner and input. Thus, it improves learners' personal motivation and capacities. *Conversational Interaction* affects positively to the output because it fosters a process that improves production capacities of learners (Mackey, 1999). Furthermore, *Conversational Interaction* becomes the supporter of linguistic input defined as *Comprehensible Input* (Krashen, 1985). For instance, request for clarification, message confirmation, and other conversational structures promote *Comprehensible Input* (Long, 1985). To conclude, *Conversational Interaction Hypothesis* considerably relates to the use of Facebook in interaction in terms of providing meaningful conversational interaction and negotiation opportunities.

Conclusions and Discussion

As previously detailed, the theoretical background of the use of Facebook in interaction relates to three hypotheses. First, the *Interaction Hypothesis* supports the notion that the proficiency of language learners is correlated with interaction and communication opportunities. Second, the *Social Interaction Hypothesis* defines social interaction as an action or event that takes place in a defined period of time and it is basic, common and strong characteristics of human life. Last, the *Conversational Interaction Hypothesis* is based on the negotiation of meaning between language learners and interlocutors. In that way, conversational interaction provides comprehensible input for language learners.

Given that the use of Facebook relates to the mentioned hypotheses, several recommendations can be noted. To begin with, teachers should be aware that Facebook provides several opportunities for language learners regarding interaction. In other words; teachers can use Facebook as an interactional environment to facilitate the learning and teaching processes. In that way, it becomes possible to support collaboration and cooperation opportunities. Moreover, foreign language teachers should revise and update their roles in the foreign language-teaching context because Facebook is an alternative way for interaction and requires competence to organize according to the aims of the learning and teaching processes. Teachers can provide authentic materials via Facebook within the scope of interaction and create a natural learning context. For instance, learners are able to show an instant reaction to the ongoing interaction that makes them a part of a process and supports their social presence.

Some recommendations for further research can be also noted. For a deeper understanding of the use of Facebook as an interaction tool in accordance with the mentioned hypotheses, qualitative studies seem necessary. This is also necessary to develop scales and questionnaires regarding learners' and teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards the use of Facebook as an interaction tool in the foreign language learning and teaching process. By this way, it will be possible to see the relationships between the use of Facebook and various factors that may affect the interaction process. Finally, after obtaining the variables in the scope of the utilization of Facebook, experimental studies are necessary for understanding the effects of the variables at high-level controlled research settings. In conclusion, as research on the use of Facebook in interaction in the foreign language learning and teaching contexts is relatively a new research area, basic, applied and practical research should be carried out.

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